THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

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The Goodly Creatures	C. M. KORNBLUTH
The Marble Ear	GERALD HEARD
To a Ripe Old Age	WILSON TUCKER
They Bite	ANTHONY BOUCHER
The Unidentified Amazon	H. NEARING, JR.

also JACK FINNEY, CHARLES L. HARNESS, ESTHER CARLSON, and others

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 3, No. 8 DECEMBER

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Cover by Chesley Bonestell
(Little America being established on one of Jupiter's largest satellites)

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To a Ripe Old Age

by WILSON TUCKER

GEORGE YOUNG SNEEZED and squinted his eyes. The dirty wallpaper clinging to the ceiling above him seemed ready to come loose and fall. He sneezed again and rolled his eyes slowly, taking in the equally sad paper peeling from the sidewalls — faded roses, and beneath that, blue feathers. A battered old telephone hung on the wall near the door. The room contained a peculiar odor. His trousers were thrown over a chair beside the bed.

"Mother of Moses!" George Young complained aloud. "Another firetrap."

He fought away the ache in his back and the dull pain in his chest to sit up. The movement sent a fine cloud of dust flying. He sneezed again, and continued sneezing until the dust had cleared away.

"What the hell goes on here?" George demanded of the peeling wallpaper. His uneasy nostrils cringed from the smell of the place.

Slowly swinging his feet off the bed and to the floor, he swore loudly when his naked toes made jarring contact with several glass bottles. Curious, George peered down. Liquor bottles — all empty. With growing incredulity he examined them, attempted to count them. Bottles, all shapes, all kinds, all colors, all manner and variety of labels, empty bottles. They began at the baseboard of the wall near the head of his bed and marched across the dusty carpet, a reasonably straight line of them running from the head to

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the foot of the bed. His eyes swung that way, still doubtfully counting, to find the bottles turned a corner. At the count of 52 they swung around the scarred bedpost and continued parallel with the footboard.

George gingerly lifted himself to his feet and rested his hands on the footboard, staring over and down. The empty bottles continued their fantastic march across the floor and turned a second corner. George swallowed and lay back down on the bed. Dust flew. He sneezed.

"Stop that, damn it!" he yelled hoarsely. "Why don't they dust this stinking firetrap?"

After a long moment he very carefully rolled over on his belly to stare at the floor on the opposite side of the bed. Empty bottles. After turning that second corner the bottles maintained their marching line up to the wallboard once more. His bed was ringed by bottles, a three-sided ring with each end anchored at the wall. All empty, all large — he saw that he had not wasted his money on pint sizes.

"Money — !"

Alarmed, George leaped from the bed in another cloud of dust to snatch up the rumpled trousers. There was no wallet in the pockets. He shook his addled head to clear away the dust and haze, and grabbed for the pillow. The wallet was there. Hurriedly he opened it, plucked out the sheaf of currency and counted the remaining bills.

"Oh, no, Mother of Moses!" Thoughtlessly, George ran to the window, inserted his fingers into the two-inch opening along the bottom and pulled it up. He thrust his head out into the hot sunlight. "Police! I've been robbed!"

He brought his head in again to stare at the array of bottles. Once more he counted the money in his wallet. He lifted a naked foot to kick at the nearest empty, and thought the better of it. Slowly then, using a dirty index finger, he made a second count of the number of bottles, multiplied the total by five, and compared that sum with the remaining money. The answer was startling.

"I was robbed," he repeated dully. "Hell, I never get that drunk! Why — I *couldn't* drink all that." George paused to survey the marching line. "I don't think I could." He paused again, considering. "Well, I never could before."

He stepped over the bottles and sat down on the bed. Dust arose, he sneezed. The single bedsheet beneath him was covered with a crust that made his bottom itch. The wallet lay open in his hand.

More than $400 gone . . . where? Into all that joy-juice? Four hundred bucks, the money he had saved up for his furlough. Four hundred bucks earned the hard way by scrubbing latrines, polishing brass, cleaning the

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damned rifle, policing the grounds, drilling, drilling, drilling. . . . Eleven months in the army, eleven months of deepest privation and degrading toil, eleven months of saving his meager pay and running it up in crap and poker games; and finally, after eleven months, a ten-day delay-enroute. From Fort Dix, New Jersey, to Camp Walton, California, with a delay-enroute.

All right, so he had delayed enroute. Somewhere. He had climbed down off the train — in somewhere town — and squandered about $400 on those bottles now surrounding the bed. But where was somewhere town? And still more alarming was a new thought: which of those ten days was it *now*, today? How far was he from Camp Walton and how many days had he left to reach there?

Hurriedly he arose from the bed in a cloud of dust and jumped the line of bottles, to snatch up the earpiece of the ancient wallphone. There was a layer of dust on it.

"Hey, down there!" George shouted into its mouth, "where the hell is this? And what day is it?"

The phone stayed dead.

"Hell of a note," he declared and let the earpiece bang against the wall. Behind the faded wallpaper some loose plaster dribbled down. "Hell of a note, I say." He turned to appraise the room.

The room was dingy like all cheap hotels, the carpet was ragged and worn as in all firetraps and the bed was a hand-me-down the Salvation Army had thrown away. He looked at the discolored sheet and wondered how he had slept on it, sniffed the odor of the room and wondered how he had stayed alive in it. His body itched, so he scratched. His chest seemed to be encrusted and matted with a sticky, odorous glue. The glue had a familiar smell. Dust covered the bed other than where he had lain, covered the solitary chair and the light fixture hanging from the ceiling. Dust arose from the carpet as he stalked across it. George paused once more to examine the bottles — a thin layer of dust covered the bottles.

"Hell of a note," he repeated and picked up his trousers. He shook the garment, sneezed twice, and put them on. He couldn't find his socks, shoes or shirt — there was nothing in the room other than his trousers. Wearing them, he unlocked the bedroom door to stare at the number. He was on the third floor. Without hesitation he strode into the hallway and sought the stairs, dust flying with every footfall. George clumped down the stairs, taking a savage delight in making as much noise as possible, navigated the second floor landing and continued on to the street floor. The lobby was empty.

"Hey there! Wake up — it's me, George Young."

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There was no answer, no sudden appearance.

George strode over to the tiny desk and pounded on it. Dust flew up in his nostrils and he sneezed again. He glanced around the lobby to discover he was still alone. A calendar pad caught his eye and he whirled it around, blew dust from the surface and read the date.

"The sixteenth," he repeated it aloud. "That was . . . uh, two days after I left Dix. Yeah. The sixteenth . . . so I've got eight days left anyhow." He pounded on the desk once more and waited several minutes for an answer. The sunlight shining through the unwashed glass of the street door finally caught his eye, and he turned toward it.

George Young pushed out into the bright sun, stood on the hot pavement to stare at the empty street.

"What the hell goes on here?" he demanded.

A collie dog pushed up from the back seat of a nearby automobile, regarded him with some surprise, and leaped out to trot over to him.

"Well — hello, George!" the dog greeted him warmly. "Mother of Moses, am I glad to see you up and around. I am your best friend, George."

"Go to hell," George snapped peevishly and pivoted on the sidewalk to stare both ways along the deserted street. "Where is —" He broke off, whirled back to the dog.

"*What* did you say?"

"I said," the animal repeated happily, "that I am your best friend. You know — a dog is man's best friend. I am a dog and you are a man, so I am your best friend."

George stared suspiciously at the collie's shining eyes, its open mouth and lolling pink tongue. Then he very carefully backed across the sidewalk and into the lobby, pulling shut the door. The dog padded after him and put its nose to the glass.

"Open the door, George. I am your best friend."

"Nooo . . . not mine, you ain't. Go away."

"But George, I *am* so. You told me."

"I didn't tell you nothing . . . now scat!"

"You did, George, you *did*," the animal insisted. There was something akin to pleading in its voice. "This is a hell of a note! You were upstairs sleeping on the bed and I came up to see you every day. You taught me to speak, George, you said you didn't want any dumb dogs hanging around. You taught me everything I know."

"I don't bark," George declared hotly.

"You said it was the English language, George, whatever that is. Good old King's English, you told me. Is King a man too, George? You said a dog was man's best friend, so here I am a dog, eager to be your best friend."

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George fixed the collie with a beady eye. "I never saw a talking dog before."

The dog giggled. "I never saw a talking man before. Gee whiz, but you stinked."

"Where are they?" George demanded then. "Where is everybody? Where'd they go?"

"Alas, they were all gone when I arrived."

George Young jumped and searched the visible parts of the street outside, and then whirled around for another inspection of the lobby. He was the sole remaining human in sight. He glared down at the dog, summoned his courage and pushed through the lobby door a second time to stand on the burning pavement. He made a careful survey of the street.

Automobiles stood at the curb before the hotel and were parked elsewhere along the street. None contained an occupant. Office windows and shop doorways were open to the warm summer air, quite empty of life. Debris littered the streets and avenues, moving only on the occasional prompting of some idle breeze. Tall buildings reared along the block, uninhabited. There was no sound but his own hoarse breathing. The thoroughfares were empty, the cars empty, the stores and offices empty, the lobby behind him empty. He saw no people — George chopped off the train of thought to glance into the air, to search the ledges running along the nearer buildings. There were no birds, either. Nothing, no one, but him and the collie.

"Where is everybody?" he asked again, weakly.

"Gone," the dog told him sadly, echoing his emotions. "Alas, all gone, absent without leave, over the hill, taking a powder, vamoosed. Hell of a note."

"But *where*?" the bewildered soldier insisted.

The collie tried and failed to shrug. "Gobbled up."

George growled at him. "You're pretty damned sassy for a dog."

"I am your best friend, George," said the collie. "I came up to see you every day."

"You're nuts. The door was locked."

"Oh no, George. I flew. I am your best friend."

The soldier contemplated the dog with a weary disgust. "So all right . . . so you flew. If you can sit there and argue with me, I guess you can fly." And then he added triumphantly: "But I was asleep all the time, so how could I teach you anything?"

"Mother of Moses, George, it all came forth from your mind! Oh yes, you were asleep all right, hitting the sack, rolling in the hay, taking 40 and whatnot, but the King's English flowed right out of your mind. Every-

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thing I am today I owe to your mind, brain, gray matter, skull-stuffing, sawdust and et cetera. You didn't explain et cetera to me, George. All the while you slept your mind flowed, flowed right out to me in brainwaves. I know it all, I know everything you know. I am your best friend, George, because you said a dog was man's best friend."

The man stared, incredulous. "Do you mean to say you flew upstairs and *read* my mind while I slept?"

"That I did, George, that I did. You smelled, George. We were in perfect sync, fix, communion, tune."

"Oh, brother!"

"Am I really your brother, George?" The collie's tail wagged with sudden pleasure. "Yes, I guess I am your brother. You said once you were a son of a —" The dog yelped with pain and jumped away. "Now, George!"

"Don't you *now-George* me! Get away from here, go on, shoo. I don't like talking dogs."

"You shouldn't treat your best friend that way, George old pal, bosom buddy, good stick."

He lunged savagely at the animal. "You ain't my best friend — not by a long shot! I don't make friends with talking dogs. I don't make friends with smart-aleck dogs. I don't make friends with flying dogs. I don't ever want to see you again! Now get out of here before I kick your —" and he sent the kick flying. The frightened collie yelped and scuttled away, to look back just once before vanishing into an alley.

George Young left the hotel behind and strode with a determined purpose to the nearer intersection. Standing at the corner, he raised a hand to shade his eyes from the sun and peer along the four streets. His determination dribbled away. No living thing moved in his line of sight. Down the block a car had gone out of control, veered across the sidewalk and smashed into a store window. He ran to it hopefully, prepared to welcome nothing more than the body of some unlucky motorist. The car was empty, save for a crumpled newspaper.

"The bomb!" he shouted aloud at the sudden thought. "The dirty bastards dropped the bomb. They wiped —" His voice trailed away to nothing as he examined the nearer buildings. None of them showed the slightest traces of a blast, any blast. There was nothing to indicate so small a thing as a black powder bomb going off. Defeated, he reached into the car for the newspaper and smoothed it out.

It held no mention of a bomb, no hint, or threat of a bomb, no clue or forewarning to any sort of a catastrophe. The front page as well as those inside mirrored nothing more than the day-to-day violence at home and abroad. Like the dusty calendar on the hotel desk, the newspaper was

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dated the sixteenth. A stopping date. He dropped it, uncomprehending. "Hell of a note," George complained.

Why . . . you'd think he was the last man in the world.

George Young sat on the curb in front of a grocery store, watching the summer sun go down and eating his supper from a collection of pilfered cans and jars. He had helped himself to the food, there being no one in the store to serve him or restrain him. The bread he had passed by because it was hard and some of the loaves showed traces of green mold, and that in turn had caused him to doubt the fruits and vegetables. Most of the meats and cheeses in a neutralized refrigerator seemed to be safe, but still it held a peculiar odor and he had slammed the door on the box.

Cans, jars and a box of wax-sealed crackers made up his meal. Unable to locate a coffee pot or running water, he drank canned juices and soda water.

In the several hours since leaving the hotel he had also helped himself to an automobile and wandered the length and breadth of the town, looking for someone, anyone. He had left the car radio running for hours, waiting for a voice, any voice, child, man or woman. The only moving thing he had seen was a flea-bitten sparrow that faithfully followed his wanderings, clearly chirping "George —" at tiresome intervals. He had thrown a rock at the sparrow. The day was gone and empty, the sun setting on a lonesome city and a lonesome man.

"Hell of a note!" he cried for the hundredth time, and hurled an empty can far across the street. It rattled loudly in the deserted silence. The silence puzzled him, frightened him, made him unsure of his future. Should he drive on to Camp Walton — would he find anyone living in California? What about tomorrow, and the next day, and all the days after that? What would it be like to be alone for the rest of his life?

"Hell of a note," he said again, shouting after the can. "Just one woman would do. One lousy woman!"

"Georgie, lamb. . . ."

He stiffened with surprise and swiveled his head on his shoulders. She stood waiting only a few feet away, a vision for his starving eyes. He toppled from the curb with shock and lay in the street, looking up at her. Wow, what a woman!

She possessed the shape of all those lovely, desirable girls in the pin-up pictures he treasured, only more shapely. Her hair was the glorious color of flaming ripe wheat to match the glowing descriptions he had read in a thousand stories, only more glorious. She had a face so breathtakingly beautiful it defied description; eyes like limpid, inviting pools that heroes tumbled into. She was a tall, long-legged, chesty, tanned babe with enough

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sizzle for five harem dancers. And she was clad in nothing more than a skimpy two-piece swim suit.

Her every line and curve, hollow and hill shrieked a precious commodity which George was always seeking. She had shining golden eyes and a lolling, pink tongue. She was what that guy Smith would describe as a seven-sector call-out. And now she waited there all alone, appealing to him! George struggled up from the gutter.

"Honey . . . baby. . . ," she seemed to whisper.

"Mother of Moses!" George declared. "All mine!"

"Lamb-pie, angel child . . . come to mama." She held out her hands to him.

"Where in hell did *you* come from?" he demanded.

"Oh, I've been around, George. Are you lonely?"

"Am I lonely!" he shouted, and leaped the curb to put his hands on her. "Baby, where have you been all my life?"

She smiled up into his happy face. "Oh, I'm from Glissix, George, but you don't really care about that. I came here a few days ago. I'm a floozy."

George froze. "Say that again?"

"I'm a floozy, George, a skirt, a doll, a walker, a babe. Do you like me, George? Do you like my skin?"

He raised the palm of his hand to slap his forehead rapidly, knocking out the cobwebs. She was still there. "Look," he pleaded, "I don't get all this. I don't care a damn where you came from and I don't give a damn what you are. You're *people*, and you look like a million to me. All I know is that you're the hottest peach I ever laid eyes on in my life, and I'm craving company." He held onto her arm tightly lest she vanish. "Let's get together. How about a drink?"

"Drink? But I don't need water, George."

"Who said anything about water? Look, doll, you *must* know the score, you've seen what this town is like. There ain't nobody here — the whole damned population has skipped out and left us. Mass desertion, that's what it is. The place is ours, see? All we have to do is walk along and help ourselves." He tugged at her arm to start her moving. "Look down there — see that saloon? That's for us. And over in the next block is another one, and another one. All ours. We just help ourselves, doll, free and on the house. Come on, let's you and me have a nip of rotgut."

She was trotting alongside him now to match his eager, rapid pace. "Will I like rotgut, George?"

"Baby, you'll love it!" he told her gustily, watching the jiggle of her garments from the corner of his eye. "It can *do* things for you."

It did things for her.

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Dusk had long since fallen and the moon was up, but it failed to top the taller buildings and illuminate the street canyons until near midnight. At that hour, George and the lovely doll had passed freely from the portal of one liquid refreshment to the next, sampling this and that, all unaware of the growing darkness and the absence of electricity. They were only aware of their interest in each other. And rotgut had done some startling things to the blonde whose hair was like ripe wheat. For one thing, the hair exhibited a certain difficulty in maintaining the color of ripe wheat. Had the various saloons been illuminated by electricity the carousing soldier might have noticed that, might have noticed that the hair was sometimes reddish, sometimes brown, sometimes like long green grass and sometimes no color at all.

And for another thing, demon rum had caused the girl to be acutely aware of the confining garments she wore. They were an uncomfortable restraint and she soon slipped out of them. "I'm not used to wearing clothes, George," she said by way of explanation.

George grandly waved the explanation aside, and the upper half of the swim suit now reposed on the antlers of a buck hanging on some lost wall behind them. The lower half he carried in his hip pocket as a souvenir. He had offered to remove his trousers, the only article of clothing he now possessed, but he said he was afraid of catching cold. And somewhere, sometime during the night George discovered the moonlight spilling in the window.

"Come here, buttercup," he said, reaching for her hand. "I want to see how you sparkle in the moonlight."

He turned and marched away with the hand. The girl got up from her chair as quickly as she could and followed it. He paused at the window, to place her in the proper position and her body sparkled in the moonlight. The moon seemed to make it sparkle a bit queerly, as though seen through a haze or a curtain of smoky cellophane. George decided they needed another drink to dispel the illusions. He usually played bartender because she was unfamiliar with the liquids and had mixed some devilish concoctions.

"I ain't been drunk for a long, *long* time," George confided to her, thumping her shoulder with each word. "Not since last night in fact. I counted the bottles — man, what bottles! Only you know what?" He hesitated, groping for the half-remembered details of the episode. "You know what?"

"What?" the sparkling body asked.

He reached for the body, picked her up and placed her on the bar before him. "Gee, you don't weigh a thing." He was pleased with his unexpected strength, and slapped her thigh. "But you sure got what it takes."

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"What?" she asked again, smoothing out the indentation his hand had made.

"I didn't really drink all those bottles — no sir! I thought I did, this morning, but I didn't really." He stopped again to collect the memories. "We was talking about those champagne baths, see? Me and some of the guys on the train. One of the guys, this corporal, said he read a piece in the paper about an actress or somebody taking a bath in champagne, and another guy pushes in and says no, it was a tub of milk. They got to arguing about it and to shut them up, I said I'd take a whiskey bath and see how it was. That's what I said." He paused for breath, took a drink and maneuvered a restless hand. "So I did, see honey? I bought all those bottles, must have spent over 400 bucks and got myself all those bottles."

"And took a bath," she finished for him. "Baby."

"Naw, I didn't take a bath! I couldn't — there wasn't no bathtub in my room. So I just laid down on the bed and poured it over me. Of course, I drank *some* you understand, but I poured it over me. Took a whiskey shower, by damn! Four hundred bucks worth, right on me." George reached down to scratch the dried glue on his chest. "That's why I'm all sticky." He marvelled at himself. "Boy . . . I'll bet I smelled this morning!"

"You certainly did, George. I visited you every day."

"You did? You really did? Do you mean to tell me that I laid there like a log with a hot peach like you in the room? I must be going crazy!"

"Oh, I didn't mind at all, George. I thought you were nice. I am your best — I want to do things with you honey, lamb-pie, sweet man, snuggles."

"Atta gal!" He pinched her but she made no protest. "You're the kind of a doll I go for. I'm glad there ain't no people around here — just me and you, all alone. More fun that way."

"Alas, they are all gone, George. Skedaddled. They've been gone for many days. The Hunters ate them . . . gobbled them up." She sipped at a bottle of rotgut and delightful shivers ran down her body.

"Yeah," he said, watching the shivers and the body. "That's what a dumb dog told me this morning. Everybody gone, except me and you." He swallowed another drink. "Ate them all up, eh? Imagine that, just like cannibals. What hunters?"

"The Hunters from Glissix."

"Never heard of the place. Is it in Jersey?"

"No, George." She shook her head slowly because the rotgut was playing tricks with her equipoise. "Glissix is up there."

"Up where?" he asked the lone reflection in the mirror.

She lifted a slow, lazy arm to point toward the moonlit sky. "Up there."

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George wasn't watching the arm, he had only moved his head to observe the effect on her chest.

"Glissix is out there," she continued, "away out there beyond the moon and the sun, George. Out there and far away; it's dark and cold and not like *here* at all, it's more like the moonplace, honeyboy. You wouldn't like Glissix, my hero, pet, joyboy, sweetguy."

"Never heard of the town," he declared and opened another bottle by striking its neck against the bar. "Have a nip of this . . . do you a world of good. From Glissix, eh? Are you a Hunter? Hunter-ess?"

"Oh no, George!" She played with his hair. "I can't be a Hunter . . . the Hunters eat living things, like you. I don't eat *living* things, George. I'm a Follower."

"Pleased to meet'cha, follower. I don't know what I am; I ain't voted yet. What did them hunters want to gobble up the people for, babydoll?"

The blonde babydoll leaned forward from her seat on the bar to wrap her legs about his waist and a friendly arm around his shoulders. The arm proved a trifle short because the rotgut was playing tricks on her again, so she lengthened it to stretch all the way around to the opposite shoulder. Babydoll placed her inviting pink lips against his and spoke while she was kissing him. The kiss had a curious dry quality.

"They were hungry, lamb-pie. They always wake up hungry, every spring. And they go everywhere, eating everything that is alive. All summer long they eat, eat, eat, making themselves fat so they can sleep all winter. Sometimes I go hungry too, when they leave nothing behind for me." She broke off the long kiss.

George smacked his lips. "They didn't eat me."

"They couldn't get near you, George boy. *You stunk.* You turned their stomachs, so they left you behind for me. But I can't eat you now, lover mine."

"I'm hungry right now," George announced, eyeing her. "And *you* look good enough to eat, baby."

"Now, George! You wouldn't like me and I wouldn't like you. You're still alive, George."

"I hope to tell you I'm still alive George!" George responded. He reached for the body. "Come to papa."

Why . . . you'd think he had dishonorable intentions.

It was long after midnight and the moon had vanished behind the opposite rim of the street canyon, leaving it in darkness. George Young lounged in the open doorway of a furniture store, scratching a stubble of beard on his face. The whiskey seemed to be wearing off, leaving him with

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a vaguely disappointed feeling. He turned his head to look at the blonde who was stretched out full length on a bed in the display window. She had vaguely disappointed him too, although he couldn't quite identify the cause of the dissatisfaction.

She raised her head and smiled. "Joyboy."

"I need a drink," he answered weakly.

The blonde leaped from the bed and worked her way through the articles in the window to join him. "I love rotgut!" she whispered, snuggling up to him.

"You and me both; I need a stiff one. All this talk about hunters and followers gives me the creeps."

"Oh, but they don't creep, George. I don't either."

He mumbled something under his breath and moved out to the curb. The girl came gliding after him. He stopped with one foot lifted from the curb to peer across the street, attempting to decipher a sign hanging in the darkness.

"What are you looking for, sweet man?"

"A drugstore. That one over there."

"What's a — Why?"

"To get a drink, quick." George stepped off the curb and crossed over, the girl still trailing after. The magic had somehow left her and he didn't bother to watch for the jiggles. The drugstore doors were closed but not locked, and he pushed in to look around. Bypassing the soda fountain and the candy counters, George made his way to the far side of the store and pawed over the displays until he found flashlights. He flicked a button and lit one.

"Ooooh, that's pretty, George."

Ignoring her, he followed the beam of light to the rear of the store and through a small white door marked PRIVATE. George found himself in the druggist's prescription and mixing room, surrounded by the ingredients of the trade. He flicked the light about the shelves.

"Bottles," the blonde squealed. "Look at all the nice rotgut!"

"Naw," George contradicted, "some of this stuff ain't fit to drink. Wait until I locate the good stuff."

The good stuff he searched for proved to be a gallon can of carbon tetrachloride, although he wasted the better part of half an hour finding it. Removing the lid, he took a quick sniff and tears formed in his eyes.

"Ahhh," he pronounced in satisfaction, "this is it. Doll, this'll send you."

"Will I like it, George?"

"Baby, you'll love it." He handed her the can and she nearly dropped it, not expecting the weight. "Bottoms up."

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"What?"

"Wrap your mouth around that little spout and turn the can upside down. Best little old rotgut you ever tasted!" He stepped back to watch, playing the light on her.

She did as she was told, struggling to hold the heavy can over her head. The liquid made a gurgling noise as it poured from the spout. George waited, expectant.

"Wow!" she exclaimed after a moment and dropped the can. "Wow, George. People certainly make fine rotgut." Her eyes grew round and for a few seconds her head balanced precariously on her shoulders, wobbling from side to side. She put up her hands to steady it. "Why did we waste time in all those saloons?"

"I don't know," George said weakly. "I think I need a drink."

"Try some of mine, hotshot."

"No thanks — I've got ulcers." He turned the light on a display of bottles along the wall, and presently found several dark brown jars in a locked case. Smashing the door, he reached in for them and held the flash close to read the labels. *Strychnin.* He set it aside and turned his attention to the next bottle, *tincture of nux vomica.* The label puzzled him for a moment but he placed it beside the first bottle. In rapid succession he selected *acetanilid, aconite, cyanid, bichlorid of Mercury, sodium fluorid,* and *prussic acid.* His hand hesitated over *emetin* and then rejected it on the off chance it might be an emetic. George recognized only a few of the names but he was certain they were potent.

One by one he opened the bottles and dumped their contents into a mixing bowl. Poking around among the large jugs on a lower shelf, he discovered and added to the bowl a pint of methyl alcohol. The blonde obligingly held the light for him while he stirred the powders, dissolving them into the liquid.

"There!" George announced at last, peering into the deadly brew. He wondered if the little bubbles coming to the top would add zing. "I think I'll call it the Peoples' Cocktail." He took the light and handed the bowl to the girl. "Down the hatch."

"Bottoms up?"

"Bottoms up. And goodnight, babydoll."

She tilted the bowl to her lips and drained it. Then she sat down on the floor, hard. George turned the light on her. To his startled, wondering gaze her body seemed to scoot rapidly across the floor and smack against the far wall. The girl's head was completely turned about, facing the rear. An arm came loose at the shoulder and toppled to the floor. The blonde finally fell over. George walked over and played the light on her.

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"Gee whiz," he said, quite shaken.

The head turned around again and her eyelids fluttered open. The beautiful golden eyes looked up at him, filled with adoration.

"Oh, George — you sweet man!"

He turned and ran for the street. In a moment he knew she was loping along behind him.

How he came to the bank and what caused him to turn in, George never afterward fully realized. He didn't put much stock in the manipulations of fate, and the guidings of the subconscious mind was but a meaningless phrase he had read somewhere. He was running along the darkened street in desperation, not unmixed with fright, when the gray marble building loomed up in the bobbing beam of the flashlight. He recognized the building as typical of banks everywhere, not actually dwelling on the thought, and turned to run through the double doors without hesitation. The blonde was hard on his heels.

Inside, he could think of nothing but to continue running. He darted through a swinging gate that marked off some manager's office, ran around behind a pair of desks and overturned chairs, and down the aisle behind the tellers' cages. At the far end of the big room the aisle opened onto another and smaller room filled with business machines, and just beyond that, George glimpsed a huge vault door resplendent in bronze and steel trim. He sped for the vault. The girl chased after him.

George dashed into the vault, flicked the light around wildly, and scooped up a brown canvas sack. The girl beside him snatched up its twin, and together they turned to run out again. George dropped his sack just outside the vault.

"Quick," he gasped, breathing hard from the effort, "money! Go get another one!"

She turned and reëntered the steel chamber. He slammed the door on her, savagely twisting the spoked wheel that secured it, just as savagely twirling the tumblers of the combination locks. And then there was silence. George was whistling as he left the bank.

Why . . . you'd think he had locked her away forever.

George Young critically examined his face in the mirror, running a hand through his heavy beard and noting the streaks of gray sprouting here and there. It would be turning soon, he decided, turning to match the shaggy gray at his temples. He had long ago given up the task of shaving, because shaving annoyed him and because there was no one else to see him. Now, with a corner of his mind, he toyed with the idea of removing the beard if only to remove those irritating specks of gray from his daily inspection.

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He didn't want to awaken some morning and have the mirror tell him he was an old man, a graybeard. He preferred to think of himself as a young man, as young as that whippersnapper who had climbed down off a train 30 years ago and taken a whiskey shower, as young as the howling soldier who had owned a blonde and a town for one full night, just once, 30 years ago.

George sighed and turned away from the mirror.

He picked up his carefully wrapped lunch, a book he was slowly reading, and a tin of stale pipe tobacco. Leaving the small cottage he had appropriated for himself, he mounted a bicycle waiting at the bottom of the steps and peddled off toward town, his legs dully aching with the advance of age. The sun was bright and warm on his bare head and he took his time riding down to the bank. There wasn't much of a breeze moving through the empty streets.

He liked to look at the familiar spots — here a saloon where a bit of a swim suit still hung from a buck's antlers, there a bed in a display window where he had briefly slept. He never failed to pass the drugstore without recalling the blonde's last words of endearment. The words and scenes were all quite clear in his memory. Thirty years didn't seem such a long time — until you began thinking of them in another way.

George parked the bicycle outside the bank and entered the double doors, walking across a floor thick with money because it pleased him to walk on it. Several years ago he had scattered the money there, and had pulled a desk over to the vault door, a desk now littered like a housekeeper's nightmare. The desk top was crammed with empty liquor bottles, old tobacco tins, books he had long since read, wadded papers from hundreds or thousands of past lunches, and mounds of pipe ashes. Over everything but the most recently used hung the dust of years. George cleared away a little space on a corner of the desk and put down his fresh lunch, his tobacco and the book he was reading that week. Finally he sat down in a comfortable chair and lit his pipe.

Hitching his chair up to the vault door, he scanned the endless possible combinations he had penciled there and noted those that had already been checked off. George took a heavy drink from the bottle, and leaned forward to put his hands on the tumblers, turning them. Any day now, or any year, he might hit upon the right combination.

Why . . . you'd think he wanted his blonde back again.

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With the publication of the definitive collection of his short stories, FANCIES AND GOODNIGHTS *(Doubleday, 1951), John Collier won the International Fantasy Award for the best fiction of that year. Needless to say, your editors cast an enthusiastic vote with the majority. At that time we believed that John Collier stood alone, the unchallenged master of his craft. Then, tall, blonde and beautiful Esther Carlson came into our editorial lives. Space does not permit the proper enumeration of Miss Carlson's charms, either of person or of personality. Nor is it possible for any typewriter save her own to give more than a faint adumbration of the charms of her writing. So we'll say, briefly, that here is a delightfully mad fantasy, one that could have been written only by John Collier . . . or by Joanna Collier (née Esther Carlson).*

Happy Landing

by ESTHER CARLSON

MISS ROBINSON gave birth to a child of sin in the enormous attic of her father's Victorian house and, wishing neither to expose nor compound her error, placed it in a cardboard box under the eaves and cared for it from time to time.

Fourteen years later, at the death of her father, Miss Robinson married a merchant in buttons and ribbons, Morton Purvis by name. She was 32, a full-blown tiger lily under the black that sheathed her, head to knee. He was twenty-two with that pale acned beauty peculiar to strong men weakened by a poetic soul. His manner was one of quiet desperation for he had lived with his sister and her boisterous brood and it never failed, *it never failed*, just as a sonnet was about to burst his teeming brain, the baby needed changing. Miss Robinson's funereal garb attracted him; the solitude of her gloomy mansion positively seduced him. They were married in St. Swithin's Episcopal Church.

And Mrs. Purvis forgot about the attic.

Their honeymoon was sheerest bliss. Morton recited every poem he ever wrote, told her all about his button and ribbon business, confessed in detail his awful suffering which had ended on that day of mutual discov-

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ery at the gooseberry festival. She listened and soothed his brow with a fevered hand.

They dismissed the clattering crone in charge of the kitchen; they discharged the whistling gardener so that their isolation could be complete, and Morton composed a fine long ballad rhyming every word but orange in honor of his wife, new life and end of strife.

Every morning precisely at 8:45 Morton flung open the double baronial doors of his castle to walk the tree-lost road to his shop in the village. Sometimes he lingered in the bushes just to savor the immensity of the brown façade . . . its turrets, its battlements, its stained glass, plain glass, round, diamond, square, rectangle windows; the curling, looping, clinging gingerbread; the graceful, spikeful ironwork. Then, with a sigh, he would turn his back and continue to his vulgar trade.

When Morton returned home evenings, she was waiting for him, perhaps in one of the parlors off the great main hall where the staircase swept upward to the second and third floors and beyond, and they would walk hand in hand through the sitting room and the billiard room and the music room and the long dining room to the kitchen where she would set before him a can of beans or some other delicacy and listen to the sorrows of his day and twist the lock of hair upon his forehead into a curl.

The trouble was, Morton failed to notice his *wife's* battlements, turrets, etc. When she stroked him with her moist hot hand, he found it soothing and went to sleep.

Matters continued like this for some time.

One evening, however, Mrs. Purvis said: "C'mon, Morty. Can this moon and June routine. Let's get down to business."

It was then that Morton realized the crushing fact: *His wife did not understand him*!

The poor young man was so upset that he lay awake far into the night, dazed and bewildered. The rumblings of his stomach terrified him. Suppose they should awake his insistent mate? He rose stealthily, crossed their bedroom, stole down the hall, down the walnut staircase, through all the above-mentioned rooms into the kitchen for a bite.

And there he saw her!

She was ethereal and gossamer and she would have fled into the pantry at his approach had not her sleeve caught on the can opener. In an instant Morton, scarcely knowing what he did, had her by the arm, and, though she struggled like a moth in a fruit jar, soon she lay quiet.

"It is fair Diana from the woods," Morton whispered. "And I have captured her for my very own."

Her lovely pale hair coiled over his shoulder and her nearly transparent

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body, wound with flimsy material, had no more weight than moonlight, and Morton, gazing down at her, suddenly believed she was his own creation. An ode imprisoned in his snare of dreams had taken shape, had breathed in life.

With a feeble flutter, a tiny sigh, the girl opened her luminous eyes and stared straight up at him.

"Beauty incarnate," Morton whispered. "Do you live only in my imagination?"

"No," replied the girl wonderingly. "I live in the attic."

"From now on," said Morton, pleased that he was expressing himself so perfectly, "you shall live in my heart, forever and a day."

After the two had eaten a cold sausage and a can of tomato soup, she led him up the winding stair, circling higher and higher until at last they were in the dark enormous attic.

"You *are* mine, aren't you?" Morton asked anxiously.

"What are you?" she said.

"I am a poet."

"What's a poet?" asked the innocent child.

So the two settled down to the most magical of lives. The next day she showed him the treasures of her kingdom. There were massive trunks piled high with yellowed satins, intricate laces, thick velvets. There were acres of carved chests, delicious couches, soft pillows, broken bicycles, books, oil lamps, nut shells, statuary, *McClure's* magazines — and trays and trays of buttons and ribbons.

They set up housekeeping in the northwest gable and Morton opened a small button and ribbon shop in the north-northwest gable so he was never far from home. They lolled on the soft pillows and drank nectar from each other's lips, and in the middle of the night stole to the kitchen for scraps of food, though, indeed, they lived on love, not vegetables. Sometimes a squirrel came to call, or a barn swallow, and sometimes Elaine (so he had named her) in a small tantrum packed up and moved to the southeast corner where lived the tailor's dummy she called her friend.

The sun never pierced the soft attic dusk; no sound invaded the quiet but the song of a high-branched bird and, as the years went by, Morton forgot all other worlds existed. He grew paler yet, and his eyes became luminous and the two of them were like images in a clouded mirror.

One day Morton closed up his shop for good, retired, and stayed at home in the northwest gable to devote himself to the muse. The poetry of these, his mature years, was (it must be admitted) excellent, if insular, and Elaine bought every copy of his work and praised it highly.

They were very happy.

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Mrs. Purvis below, however, was not happy. For the first few weeks after her husband's disappearance, she paced the floors of the 28 lower rooms in a fury of frustration. For she believed he had fled the country. Oh, she had the pond dredged in a half-hearted way, and though this uncovered many interesting old bones, none of them belonged to Morton.

"Warty little toad! Moony, Juney, loony. I'll strangle you with ribbons. I'll make you eat your buttons . . ." And she would twist those hot moist hands of hers into knots. For the truth is, though she had not exactly loved Morton, her pride was hurt dreadfully.

In a year she closed up her house, boarded the windows, and lived inside alone (she thought). Time applied itself to the task of healing her wounds and after a decade, it succeeded. She forgot she had been Mrs. Purvis.

One bright August afternoon a rotund gentleman of the travelling profession paused in the molten sunlight on the highway and examined a dim name board on an oak. He mopped his high red forehead, shrugged and said aloud:

"Oh well, it's worth a try, anyway."

He turned down the overgrown road dragging his sample case behind him and did not pause till he was before the double baronial doors of the huge Victorian house.

"This place," he said aloud, "could use a Little Whizzer," and he pounded on the door.

After an interval of some minutes one of the doors opened a crack.

"Good afternoon, madame," he began, "I represent the Little Whizzer Vacuum Cleaner and I am here . . . and I am here . . ." He fell silent and commenced to stare at the woman. Her own eyes were boring into his.

"It isn't . . . ?" he croaked.

"Jacques!" she cried with that old wild passion in her voice.

Hours later they were gamboling all over the place.

"I always knew you'd be back," she confessed. "I waited for you."

"Well, by George!" the happy man shouted, "I did it and I'm glad."

". . . we'll be married," said she.

So in the morning Jacques Cooney became the husband of Octavia Purvis (née Robinson) and there couldn't have been a more mutually beneficient and satisfactory wedlock than was enjoyed by those two . . . except for one thing.

On their fourth anniversary Jacques appeared at the breakfast table with a sad expression on his face.

"What troubles you, my dearest love?" his wife inquired woefully.

"Ah, my daisy," the troubled man replied, "I have been superbly happy until this very morning. But I awoke early and lying there, gazing out the

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window, I saw a family of robins preparing to fly south for the winter. The mother, the father and, I believe, several children. And somehow, I began to regret my wasted life. How happy I would be to have little ones around — a boy, to counsel him on life; a wee girl to dandle on my knee. But alas. It is too late." And with this he fell to weeping into his oatmeal.

It broke her heart to see her jovial spouse thus undone and she began to weep, too, with shaking sobs. Suddenly one of the sobs cracked a seam in her memory.

"Jacques!" she cried. "Stop bawling this instant! I have a surprise for you."

He continued to sniffle.

"Listen, my dear," she rushed on. "Remember 30 years ago when I was younger and you passed this way with your Little Whizzer carpet sweeper? Remember when I went with you to the gate to bid you goodbye? Well, that goodbye was not without results!"

Jacques' tears ceased immediately. "You mean . . ."

"Exactly!" she said, her eyes glowing. "It is in the attic in a box."

"Oh, joy and delight!" the good man cried. "Let's go up and find it."

And without further ado the couple ran, nay, sprinted up the curving staircase, higher and higher until they reached the attic door. There Jacques paused, his hand trembling on the latch.

"Wait," he said. "Is it a girl or a boy?"

His wife smiled mysteriously, unable to remember.

"You'll see," she said.

Jacques threw open the barrier and they stepped into the dim upper regions. On a couch, in their home in the northwest gable, lay Morton and Elaine, he reading his latest masterpiece aloud.

The company stared at each other, singly and in groups. There was a long moment of silence.

Then Jacques began to laugh and his merry bellows wiped out the work of generations of spiders as he sputtered and chortled and danced.

"Well, by George, woman, this IS a surprise," he shouted. "TWINS!"

Mrs. Cooney peered rather closely at Morton but not a shadow of a doubt crossed her face.

"Oh, happy day," she said.

With many a paternal hug and maternal squeeze the delighted pair led their children down the stairs, and it is a fact that Morton was relieved. He was growing tired of cold sausage and tomato soup; and Elaine, for her part, was pleased; she was not, in truth, a poetry lover.

And they all lived together very happily and congenially ever after and Morton had a poem published in the *Esoteric Monthly* when he was 52, to the great pride of his parents and sister.

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Society has always looked upon the poisoner as its most loathsome member. Even in war, the word poison *has made gas an abomination among the civilized people who gallantly employ the infinitely more terrible napalm. In Seventeenth Century France a special court was devoted exclusively to the trial of poisoners and known as* la chambre ardente (*"the burning court," which lent its title to John Dickson Carr's first fantasy novel), because its only sentence was death at the stake. But here Mr. Harness presents us with a possible future society so corrupt, so inhumanly debased, that the poisoner has become a highly respected and prosperous citizen — in a story played out upon so tightly restricted a stage that the social portrait becomes all the more hideous for being executed in miniature.*

The Poisoner

by CHARLES L. HARNESS

THE LITTLE OLD MAN sat with a book in his lap, eyeing the clock.

The room that contained him was fairly typical of the subterranean dwellings that had been accumulating under North Europe ever since the Third War. The ceiling and the upper parts of the walls were covered with the usual phosphorescent moss for converting carbon dioxide into oxygen, and the resultant blue light, though diffused and shadowless, defined clearly the sparse furnishings of the room.

The man's wrinkled corvine features were masked by a venerable saintliness. His was the face of an aged angel tarnished by the brutal demands of mortality, or perhaps that of an ancient Mephistopheles momentarily intrigued by the possibilities of altruism. The faintly smiling mouth was serenely murderous, and the vulture eyes were bordered by friendly crowfeet.

From the neck down he was buried in the customary furs.

There was a peremptory knock at the door; his voice crackled in sharp but obsequious response. "Come in, good people, come in, come in."

The door crashed open so violently that he shrank back, cowering.

A short, beetle-browed man materialized at the entrance.

The old one revived instantly.

"Ah, Citizen Frank!" he said genially. "Come in, sir."

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Breathing heavily, Frank scanned the room with a scowl, then stepped over to the old man and ran his hands through the furs.

The latter giggled nervously. "I don't really mind. Naturally, as His Excellency's bodyguard, it's your duty to search me."

Frank snarled at him, and then, still breathing noisily, he wheeled toward the door and called, "Come on."

A woman entered. She was wearing a long fur-collared military cape and a monocle armored her right eye.

"Welcome, Citizeness Korodin," greeted the old man, beaming at her face, which was lovely in a pale, ascetic way.

Breathing deeply but quietly, the woman looked suspiciously about the room. Save for a deep undertone of gloom, her bloodless cheeks and mouth were without expression. She strode erectly and disdainfully to one of the chairs and started to sit down, but apparently thought the better of it and remained standing.

"And here's Citizen Dr. Mezerck," cried the host happily to the third guest.

Dr. Mezerck, who did not return the greeting, also appeared somewhat despondent. His depression, however, was not sufficiently deep to neutralize a certain alertness, which might have been the alertness of opportunism rather than that of his calling. During his searching appraisal of the old man and the room, he reached the chairs immediately after the woman, and also remained standing.

"Just three of you?" asked the aged one in some surprise. His voice had a soft, sickening quality, like the sound of a sharp knife cutting wood.

No one spoke, and he answered himself, relaxing visibly in the process. "No, here is His Excellency. Good afternoon, Citizen Korodin!"

The final entrant was a large man with incisive, uncompromising eyes and face, vaguely handsome, yet tainted with nameless evil. Even more than the others he seemed absorbed in bitter gloom, and as the woman watched him, thin lines of anguish came and went about her mouth with his every step.

"Pray come in, sir, and be seated, all of you!"

Korodin dropped wearily in the nearest chair, and was immediately followed by his companions.

"And will you pardon an old man if I do not arise and salute the erstwhile leaders of this stricken country? I was above ground this morning, and the walk up fourteen flights of stairs and down again has left me exhausted. It seems to have tired even you three stalwart gentlemen, too, not to mention Citizeness Korodin. The elevators have been off for several da—"

"Shut up!" spat Frank. "The revolutionaries are closing in on the jet-

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port." He looked at the clock on the table. "Your clock right? We got 30 minutes to make the last jet out of the province. We don't intend to waste it listening to a lot of chatter from a dirty poisoner. Is — *it* — ready?"

"*Dirty* poisoner, sir?" purred the little man. "True, I am a charter member of the Poison Guild; but you ought not to say that I am dirty. In fact, my profession has lately become so exclusive and so profitable — hence, so honorable — that it must soon be taught in the more sophisticated universities. But let that pass. As for *it*, you brought the money, of course?"

"One million kronen," said Korodin coldly, "is a great deal of money for a pinch of poison."

"Very true." The little man sighed sympathetically. "It is a costly affair. Yet, I could not keep my self-respect nor gain yours if I asked less. However, since you do not seem to have this sum at your command, I must bid you good-day. You will excuse me if I don't rise and see you to the door. My trip up the stairs this morning has left me ex—"

"Give him the money, Frank," said Korodin with curt weariness.

Frank scowled, but walked to the table and tossed a black satchel on it beside the clock.

The little man licked his lips hungrily and snatched up the satchel. "This will take but a moment, madame, gentlemen." He flipped through the notes swiftly, then examined several of the individual bills with a loupe dangling from a black ribbon about his neck.

"Do you see him using the lens?" demanded the woman quietly. "This is intolerable."

"There is a great deal of counterfeit currency floating about just now, you know," soothed the little man. "In recent weeks crime has become quite difficult to suppress, and in such sad times our moral fiber deteriorates. Only last month an officer attempted to purchase a vial of morphia with false Chinese yen. Would you believe it, he threatened my life when I refused his money. So I sold him a vial of morphia — or so he thought (it was really theobromine sulfate) — and he left satisfied. The Revolutionary War Crimes Court hanged him only yesterday, so the radio reported. I often wonder what went through his highly sensitized mind as he walked to the gallows."

He was carefully reinserting the bundles of bills into the brief case when the woman spoke to Korodin.

"Don't forget that we've got to catch that 2 o'clock jet. The longer we sit here, the greater our chances of being shot down and captured. And you know what that means."

"Shot down and captured . . ." muttered Korodin apprehensively. "If Vaigor caught us, would he really give us a trial? Could we persuade his

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court that we had acted all along in the best interests of the People's Federation and escape with life sentences?"

The woman laughed grimly. "General Vaigor announced on the screen this morning that he would give us a fair trial within twenty-four hours of capture —"

"You see!" said Korodin quickly.

"— and that we would then be shipped immediately to Regensrok —"

"Ah!" said Dr. Mezerck.

"— and fed to his personal herd of swine."

Korodin shivered. "Then sell us our poison, old man, and quickly."

"Gladly, sir. Does Dr. Mezerck have a preference?"

"How about cyanide?" said Mezerck.

"A million kronen for a little cyanide!" protested Frank. "We could have picked it up at any chemist's for nothing!"

Mezerck patted an embarrassed cough. "No, all the chemists' shops have been looted. There's no cyanide — or arsenic — or any poison of any description left in the city. *I know.*"

Korodin's brows lifted in a curious appraisal of his physician. "Oh? Then perhaps a little cyanide *is* worth a million."

"Oh, dear me, no!" interrupted the little old man. "I can give you all the cyanide you want, free, but it is simply incomprehensible to me that Dr. Mezerck should recommend it."

"Indeed?" queried Mezerck.

"How about that, doc?" said Frank. "Is cyanide good, or ain't it?"

"Why, it's a short and simple method. The enemy prisoners of war in our concentration camps preferred it over all other means."

"Is it painless, Mezerck?" said Korodin.

"There's little or no pain. You swallow the poison, and then, within a very few seconds, you have difficulty in breathing. Your heart slows down, and may stop in a state of dilation. If that happens, you're finished right there. If your heart doesn't get you, you'll soon be seized with rather violent convulsions, which aren't painful, because by then you don't know what's going on any more. And then your face becomes blue, owing to the lack of oxygen, and cyanosis sets in. You slump to the floor, unable to move a muscle, except to breathe a little, and you're in the third, or asphyxial stage. You give a few gasps, and then complete paralysis hits you, and you're dead. Cyanide is swift and sure, and I don't understand the poisoner's objection to it."

"Me either," muttered Frank, corrugating his brows rapidly but futilely.

Korodin's somber eyes flickered with the beginnings of interest. "How about that, old-man? What's wrong with cyanide? Isn't it painless?"

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"Oh, it's painless, completely painless. Your Excellency would have no complaint on that score. Compared to the discomfort of the gallows rope about Your Excellency's throat, the brief bitter taste of cyanide is nothing. The difficulty is largely a matter of concealment — or rather, the lack of it. The staffs of the Revolutionary War Crimes Courts are much cleverer than they were in the early days of the rebellion. You may recall that, in the first series of war trials, I was able to provide for the successful suicides of eight of your highest officers."

"I suspected you were behind it," said Korodin coldly. "The secret police had standing orders to destroy all Guild shops."

"Ah, me. Secret police." The old poisoner's head lolled back as he studied the ceiling reminiscently. "Splendid fellows. Never haggled. But, as I was about to say, the methods I used in those first weeks are no longer satisfactory, owing to prompt enemy countermeasures."

"Just what *are* your methods?" asked Mezerck.

"They vary. To take a fairly recent case, the Polar Chief was sentenced to be hanged within twenty-four hours after his condemnation for acts in utter disregard for the laws of humanity, whatever that means. Fortunately, he had had the foresight to come to me before his capture, despite the fact that the government had banned my shop some months previously. I gave him a false jaw molar with a screw crown, and inside was a little potassium cyanide. It was so elementary I was almost ashamed to use it. It worked then, but it wouldn't now."

"Why not?" demanded Frank.

"Because the Crime Courts are now staffed with suspicious dentists."

"But surely there are other places of concealment?" suggested Mezerck.

"Oh, there are. Take Dr. Heinrich Fu Tang, Administrator for Racial Purity. He visited me the night before he was captured, and I tried more cyanide with a new place of concealment — the fingernails."

Korodin sighed heavily. "So Fu Tang, too, disobeyed me."

The little man turned sympathetic eyes on him. "It's getting so you can't trust *any*body, isn't it? Where was I? Oh — the court delivered sentence, and Dr. Fu Tang was seen to bite his nails feverishly. They carried him out in the coroner's basket."

"Then we, too, might try cyanide under the fingernails," said Mezerck.

"Oh, no! Ever since Fu Tang's death, all prisoners have been bathed immediately on capture. Any soluble poisons on the body are washed away."

"How did you evade *that*?" asked Mezerck.

"It finally occurred to me to sprinkle flakes of wax-coated poison in the hair, to resemble dandruff. So now they shave heads, and nothing soluble can be hidden on the body surface any longer."

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"Then?" said Mezerck.

"I hid cyanide in a glass eye. Still later, I provided a contact lens containing an elixir of aconite as its refractory medium. In due time I used all the artificial little items: False scar tissue soaked in atropine and waterproofed, false eyebrows, a monocle lens cut from a synthetic barium chloride crystal, and the like."

Dr. Mezerck nodded in silent approval.

"But of course, I couldn't get away with any of those little devices twice. A prisoner isn't permitted to keep anything, now. He's washed in dilute acid, then in dilute alkali, and finally in distilled water. He's x-rayed and photographed with infra-red to expose anything concealed under the skin. My last victory along body concealment lines was some days ago, when I was able to plant sponge rubber tonsils in the throat of the Secretary of Secret Police. After he was sentenced to hang he broke the concealed vial with his finger."

Korodin caressed his throat nervously. "I had no idea a little poison would be so difficult to hide. Can you really do nothing for us?"

"He's just leading up to something," interpolated Mezerck quickly. He asked the poisoner, "Have you actually administered poison without concealing anything on the body?"

"I have. For a while I drew heavily on anaphylactic methods, and the enemy court staffs were baffled."

Korodin lifted questioning eyes to Mezerck. "Anaphylaxis?"

"Anaphylaxis is induced allergy," explained the latter. "For example, I can inject a guinea pig with one microgram of an antigen, such as horse serum. The animal's system reacts to produce a large amount of antibody. In ten days I again inject the antigen, but this time only one-tenth of the original dose. The animal dies within a few minutes, of respiratory failure."

"Interesting," said Korodin.

"The theory," continued Mezerck, "is that the antigen in the second injection combines with the antibody to produce a deadly poison, known as the anaphylatoxin. That's why two bee stings separated by two-week intervals have been known to kill a man. Right, poisoner?"

"Just so," nodded the little man. "Thus, during the period I used anaphylaxis, I developed within certain of my clients specific sensitivities for certain common substances that would be available to them in prison. Did you know that some people are especially sensitive to aspirin? That for them a gram is a fatal dose? I can sharpen the sensitivity still farther to one grain —a single tablet. Heart failure follows immediately. I developed similar sensitivities for the barbiturates. The condemned man calls for a sleeping tablet, and gets it. He never wakes up. Also nicotine. A few puffs from a

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cigarette, and my client is dead. Even a whiff of lecithin in a boiled egg was fatal in one instance. But now, of course, allergy tests are made immediately upon capture, and no one is allowed drugs for any purpose whatever."

"Then, are we to understand that you can circumvent even these strict measures?" demanded Mezerck.

"I believe so."

"You're sure it's quite painless?" insisted Korodin.

"Quite. I kept your personal requirements firmly in mind, Excellency."

"I don't get it," said Frank, squinting suspiciously at the wizened little man. "What's it like, this poison?"

"I'll explain, but mostly for Dr. Mezerck's benefit."

"Go ahead," said Mezerck.

"Then consider the involuntary respiratory system, doctor, the system of thoracic muscles and nerves that keeps us breathing even when we aren't consciously trying. As you know, the blood that supplies the individual cells of the respiratory nerves must contain a certain quantity of carbon dioxide before the cells can be stimulated involuntarily and persuaded to pass the stimulus along the nerve trunk. This necessary carbon dioxide level is ordinarily maintained by a complicated reaction of the hemoglobin in the blood."

"As any first-year medical student knows," said Mezerck. "Get to the point, please."

"Now, if we can substitute for hemoglobin some compound that will perform the hemoglobic function of supplying oxygen to the system, but unlike hemoglobin, has no effect on the carbon dioxide level in the blood, and its consequent control of blood pH, we will thus remove a potent factor in stimulating the breathing nerves. Such a compound is known —"

"Of course!" exclaimed Mezerck. "Rubrin!"

The poisoner held up a bottle. "Precisely. I have here a saline solution of rubrin that I can inject into each of you as a basic substitute for hemoglobin. The solution also contains a substance that will destroy most of the hemoglobin in your blood, leaving you just enough to permit involuntary breathing during sleep. If you are captured and condemned, and wish to take your own lives, you need only to exercise vigorously. A dozen quick body lifts or knee bends should be sufficient. Anoxia sets in, and death follows quickly. Even if you were under constant observation by several guards, it would appear to them that you were merely taking a nap."

"To know that I can die in my sleep . . ." murmured Korodin. "Of course, there's really little danger of capture. Still, to know certainly, come what may, that they cannot inflict pain on my body . . . Forgive me, poisoner, that *is* worth a million."

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The woman shook her head uneasily. "I don't like it. There's something wrong about it that I can't put my finger on, but I know it's there." She faced Korodin squarely. "I say we are fools to place ourselves in the power of this man. If there is anything that we should avoid like the plague, it's the Poison Guild."

Her voice trailed off when it was evident that no one was paying any attention to her.

"No rope, no pain . . .," murmured Korodin dreamily. "Well, Mezerck, how does it sound?"

Mezerck replied slowly and with conviction. "The man's a genius. It'll work."

"Then we'll take the injections," stated Korodin.

"Yes," echoed Mezerck.

"Sure, chief," chimed in Frank.

"Not I," said Citizeness Korodin.

The little man plunged the needle through the rubber stopper of the vial, then drew it out again. "Some one will have to be first," he said, turning the needle up and expelling a tiny bubble from the syringe.

"I might as well start it," began Mezerck, taking a step forward. Then, "Wait a moment — are we the first to try it?"

"Naturally. Each Guild member is privileged to inaugurate his own inventions."

"There might be some reaction . . . On second thought, I don't think I'd care to be first." He looked at Frank contemplatively, and then both of them studied the face of Korodin for a long time.

The woman stiffened when she saw the cool confidence with which Mezerck and Frank turned to her.

"I have expressed my position, citizens," she said nervously. In vain her eyes sought those of her husband.

Frank laughed uncleanly. "It's your duty to try it first, citizeness. We're too important. Right, chief?"

Finally the woman shrugged her shoulders. "All right. It probably won't make any difference in the end."

She walked over to the poisoner, pulled back her sleeve, and let him jab the syringe into her arm.

After observing her a moment, Mezerck approached her and gently picked up her wrist.

"Pulse and respiration normal," he said. "It's safe enough."

He held out his arm for his own injection, and Frank and Korodin followed.

"That's that," clipped Korodin, swabbing his needle mark brusquely

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with a cotton wad supplied by the little man. "Let's get out of here. The car's waiting to take us to the jetfield."

The men rolled down their sleeves quickly, the woman more slowly. Then, as the three men filed hurriedly toward the entrance, the woman walked simply to the nearest chair, sat down, crossed her legs leisurely beneath her furred cape, and began polishing her monocle.

Mezerck stopped and looked back. "Coming, citizeness?"

"No. I prefer to die here."

Korodin spun around. "What is this talk of dying? Come at once."

"No."

"So your vanity is injured," sneered Korodin. "Unless you recover your senses instantly, your injury may be fatal. I've no time to coax you. The choice is yours."

He vanished through the door, followed by Frank and Mezerck, and their rapid muffled footsteps died away.

A long silence, bordered endlessly by the ticking of the clock, swallowed the room.

Finally the woman reinserted her monocle and, without turning to look at him, addressed the old man. "How many flights do you think they'll make?"

"Two or three."

Almost immediately there was a clatter outside, and Mezerck and Frank burst through the door dragging the limp body of Korodin, which they eased to the carpet.

Mezerck rubbed his sleeve across his bloodless face, and his voice trembled. "This is bad, very bad." He began fumbling at the collar of the man.

Frank hovered about helplessly, drawing his pistols, then thrusting them back into the holsters.

After her first swift examination of her husband's face and body from where she sat, Citizeness Korodin showed little apparent interest in the proceedings. She arose, yawned, and walked slowly to the bookshelves, which she inspected languidly.

As Mezerck was tugging at Korodin's coat, the big man opened his eyes and struggled to sit up. Then he groaned and pressed his hand to his forehead. "What happened? Why are we back here?"

Mezerck swallowed nervously. "You fainted on the first landing. Your rate of oxygen consumption was too high. You shouldn't have tried to run up the stairs. Remember, violent exercise will kill us."

Korodin got to his feet, his eyes sparkling viciously. "But we've got to hurry or we'll miss that 2 o'clock jet! If more oxygen is all I need, I'll just have to force myself to breathe faster."

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"But you *couldn't*," said Mezerck forlornly. "Not without tremendous help from your involuntary respiratory system. Your voluntary system would take you perhaps half a dozen flights, then you'd tire, lose a breath or two, and die on the spot."

Korodin turned a contorted face on the old man. "*You knew this would happen.* Why didn't you tell me?"

"But I *did!*" exclaimed the latter in great innocence. "I told all of you distinctly that brisk exercise would kill you. As for missing your jet, why blame me? My profession is poisons, not itineraries."

Mezerck broke in anxiously. "Just what is the critical rate of exercise? How slowly should we mount the stairs? At least you can tell us that."

"Can I? It's difficult to say. A climbing rate of two steps per second without voluntarily accelerating the respiration ought to kill you on about the fourth landing. At the other extreme, one step per minute would be perfectly safe. The critical rate should lie somewhere in between, say, one step every ten seconds."

"Fourteen stories up," muttered Korodin. "Sixteen steps to the story, fourteen times sixteen, let's see —"

"Two hundred and twenty-four," flung his wife over her shoulder.

"Two hundred and twenty-four steps. At ten seconds a step that would be 2,240 seconds. Divided by 60, would be —"

"About 37 minutes," said the woman.

"But we can't wait 37 minutes!" cried Korodin. "Vaigor is only a few miles from the jetport! Radioactive dust may sweep this area at any moment and kill our chauffeurs. Every second is vital." He snarled at Mezerck. "God, what a doctor you are!"

The latter gestured helplessly.

"Despite this delay," declared Korodin, "we may still have a chance. But as for *that* filthy little poisoner. . . ." He drew his pistol and leveled it at his host.

The latter sprang from his chair. "Wait! There's something I forgot to mention —"

"Let *me* say it," interrupted the woman, without looking around from the bookshelves. "Citizen Korodin, if you shoot our host, who'll turn off the bomb?"

The ticking of the clock suddenly became audible. Then:

"*Bomb!*" Three blended shrieks made a queer harmony of horror.

The woman replaced the volume and turned just as Frank leaped forward and seized the ancient one by the throat. "Frank, my moronic friend, must I spell it out for you? Do *you* know where the firing pin is?"

Frank slowly dropped his hands and stepped back, his face stunned.

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"Go easy," warned Korodin. "What about this bomb, poisoner?"

"It's just a small pre-hydrogen model I put together in my spare time," explained the little man modestly, as he massaged his Adam's apple affectionately. "I doubt that it could vaporize more than half the building."

Mezerck sucked in his breath sharply. "But why a bomb at all? As protection against your clients?"

"Certainly *not*, sir! My clients are the cream of the continent! No, after Citizen Korodin banned the Guild, I installed it with the thought that it was my duty to destroy my shop. But then I procrastinated, completely unable to decide exactly what my duty was. For, in a larger sense, I felt deeply obligated to Citizen Korodin and his companions for having maintained such a flourishing milieu for my profession here during the past few years, and it had long been my ambition to demonstrate my gratitude by offering my poor services to His Excellency himself. Only when the fulfillment of that ambition was assured did I feel conscience-free to destroy the shop. So this morning, when I was up at the entrance, I finally set the timer."

"To explode *when*?" demanded Mezerck harshly.

"At two sharp."

The three men shot anguished glances at the clock.

Korodin whispered between his teeth: "So now it's 1:45. Well played, little man."

Finally Frank got a good breath. "He's bluffing, chief! Don't let him get away with it!"

"He may be bluffing, of course," admitted Korodin. He studied their tormentor uneasily. "On the other hand, planting the bomb would have been highly logical — excellent insurance. We should have foreseen it. Well, it changes nothing, except that now I can't kill him. Poisoner," he demanded sternly, "if I let you go, how do I know you'll disconnect the bomb mechanism when you reach topside?"

The wrinkles instantly rearranged themselves into a mask of serene reassurance. "You are protected by the ethics of my profession."

"Just as I feared," groaned Mezerck.

Korodin's face was bleak. "It can't be helped. Whatever his motive, we've got to trust him. He must precede us, and quickly. Poisoner, run up and turn off your bomb, but keep in mind that we'll meet again."

"Really? That's most kind of you, because so far my repeat business has been negligible. I might even say — nil." He arose. "Now, madame, gentlemen, if you'll excuse me. You may follow slowly if you like." He picked up the briefcase and glided past them toward the door, his furs weighing him down like a legless spider. At the doorway he paused and measured Korodin.

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"Excellency, you are naturally concerned about the safety of your chauffeurs. I think you may set your mind at rest. The rules of my Guild permit — nay — *require* that I protect those faithful servants, if I can. Tut tut! No objections! I assure you, I won't have to go a step out of my way to do it."

"That," said the woman grimly, "I can believe. Just listen to this!"

The voice of Korodin was tight, shrill. "Well?"

"There's really very little chance that your chauffeurs will wait 40 minutes for you," explained the little man. "With the enemy advance columns drawing closer by the second behind their covering clouds of radioactive dust, it would be inhumane to require those poor fellows to wait."

"What's he getting at?"

"He means it would be a shame to waste such excellent transportation," explained Citizeness Korodin with quiet sarcasm. "*Some*body — perhaps a certain Guild member in good standing — ought to have the use of it."

"Then the discussion is pointless," said Korodin curtly, "because my men are loyal. They'll wait."

The woman lapsed into tired fatalism. "How can all of you be so dull? Especially you, Korodin. This is completely unlike you."

Mezerck pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his brow nervously.

The little man looked like a withered cherub as he drew a sheet of paper and a stylus from the depths of his furs and shuffled toward Korodin. "This is merely a routine form, supplied by the Guild printer, which instructs your chauffeurs and the jet pilot not to wait for you but to take the bearer instead. Your signature, if you please."

Korodin snorted incredulously.

"Preposterous!" cried Mezerck.

"You're crazy!" declared Frank.

The little man spoke with bland patience. "Excellencies, you are retiring from your profession; I would like to stay in mine a bit longer. Your contribution to society is ended; mine is in full flower. Would you deprive my future clients of this peace of mind that is now yours? Really, gentlemen, we must forget ourselves for a moment and think of humanity."

"No!" shouted Korodin.

"Ah, what a pity," sighed the old one. He trudged back to his chair, replaced the brief case on the table, sat down, yawned, adjusted his furs, and picked up his book. "A pleasant afternoon to you, madame, gentlemen."

"But the bomb!" cried Mezerck. "You'll be killed along with us!"

"Just so," agreed the old man amiably.

"Oh," said Mezerck.

"Wait!" declared Korodin. "I'll sign."

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"Ah?" The poisoner reached into his furs and pushed the paper across the table.

Korodin's face was the hue of wet ashes as he reached for the paper and stylus.

Afterwards, the thin wrinkled fingers refolded the form carefully. "Thank you, Excellency."

"Well, don't stand there," said Korodin nervously. "The bomb . . ."

"Of course, of course. I'm leaving now."

"I hope Vaigor's ack-ack blasts you out of the sky," said Dr. Mezerck dully.

The little man paused at the doorway. "Dear me! What an idea! Do you really think they might? Perhaps I ought to reaffirm . . . something . . ."

He rubbed his chin, then turned and walked toward the wall near the table and pulled down a folding panel-section, revealing a multi-dialed instrument board. From a hook at one side he lifted a pair of earphones and put them on over his fur cap.

The men followed him with uncomprehending eyes.

The woman gave a short, bitter laugh.

At first the little man talked softly into the panel-microphone, and then more loudly:

"Yes, general. Everything worked out nicely. You'll probably find them somewhere on the stairway. Now, General Vaigor, I would like to confirm the matter of safe conduct for the jet. Yes, sir, leaving in about a quarter of an hour. Good. Thank you very much."

Without visibly moving, Korodin seemed to collapse.

The poisoner continued: "And now just one other point, general. This concerns you personally." There was a subtle change in his voice, which had suddenly assumed the unctuous firmness of a cemetery lot salesman addressing a nonagenarian. "I know that you have very definite ideas about how the province should be reconstructed. And yet — alack! — there is always the possibility that an unappreciative populace will sabotage your gift of law and order, and to your eternal astonishment and indignation, they may even imprison you and sentence you to hang. If such an unkind event ever threatens, just keep in mind that you can always avoid the attendant discomforts if you come to me in time. Eh? Hello? Hello?"

The little man did not appear in the least offended. On the contrary, when he replaced the earphones on the panel hook and reached for his brief case, his wrinkled features were wreathed in an introspective smile.

And as he trotted past the shock-frozen faces of the three men toward the stairwell, his chuckling made a weird duet with that of Citizeness Korodin.

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Scholars of the Civil War have long pondered the mystery of the battle of Cold Harbor. General Grant, that sledgehammer of the Union, planned it as the final battle of the war in which Lee's army would be utterly destroyed. But Cold Harbor resulted in thousands of Federal dead and must be regarded as a decisive defensive triumph for Robert E. Lee, who kept his army intact in their works. Grant paid no heed to the national outcry and offered an indignant public neither alibi nor explanation. But now, through the good offices of Mr. Finney, students at last are furnished with the answer to the battle's vexing problem. The slaughter at Cold Harbor was caused by no weakness in Grant's overall planning; his disastrous deployment of his assault troops was due solely to the faulty reconnaissance of his air force!

Quit Zoomin' Those Hands Through the Air

by JACK FINNEY

HEY, quit zoomin' your *hands* through the air, boy — I know you was a flier! You flew *good* in the war, course you did; I'd expect that from a grandson of mine. But don't get to thinking you know all about war, son, or flying machines either. The war we finished in '65 is still the toughest we've fought, and don't you forget it. It was a big war fought by big men, and your Pattons and Arnolds and Stilwells — they were *good*, boy, no denying it — but Grant, there was a general. Never told you about this before, because I was swore to secrecy by the Géneral himself, but I think it's all right, now; I think the oath has expired. Now, *quiet*, boy, and listen!

Now, the night I'm talking about, the night I met the General, I didn't know we'd see him at all. Didn't know anything except we were riding along Pennsylvania Avenue, me and the Major, him not saying where we were going or why, just jogging along, one hand on the reins, a big black box strapped to the Major's saddle in front, and that little pointy beard of his stabbing up and down with every step.

It was late, after 10, and everyone was asleep. But the moon was up,

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bright and full through the trees, and it was nice — the horses' shadows gliding along sharp and clear beside us, and not a sound in the street but their hoofs, hollow on the packed dirt. We'd been riding two days, I'd been nipping some liberated applejack — only we didn't say liberated then; we called it foraging — and I was asleep in the saddle, my trumpet jiggling in the small of my back. Then the Major nudged me, and I woke up and saw the White House ahead. "Yessir," I said.

He looked at me, the moon shining yellow on his epaulets, and said, real quiet, "Tonight, boy, we may win the war. You and I." He smiled, mysterious, and patted the black box. "You know who I am, boy?"

"Yessir."

"No, you don't. I'm a professor. Up at Harvard College. Or was, anyway. Glad to be in the Army now, though. Pack of fools up there, most of them; can't see past the ends of their noses. Well, tonight, we may win the war."

"Yessir," I said. Most officers higher than captain were a little queer in the head, I'd noticed, majors especially. That's how it was then, anyway, and I don't reckon it's changed any, even in the Air Force.

We stopped near the White House at the edge of the lawn and sat looking at it — a great big old house, silvery white in the moonlight, the light over the front door shining out through the porch columns onto the driveway. There was a light in an east window on the ground floor, and I kept hoping I'd see the President, but I didn't. The Major opened his box. "Know what this is, boy?"

"Nosir."

"It's my own invention based on my own theories, nobody else's. They think I'm a crackpot up at the School, but I think it'll work. Win the war, boy." He moved a little lever inside the box. "Don't want to send us too far ahead, son, or technical progress will be beyond us. Say, 85 years from now, approximately; think that ought to be about right?"

"Yessir."

"All right." The Major jammed his thumb down on a little button in the box; it made a humming sound that kept rising higher and higher till my ears began to hurt; then he lifted his hand. "Well," he said, smiling and nodding, the little pointy beard going up and down, "it is now some 80-odd years later." He nodded at the White House. "Glad to see it's still standing."

I looked up at the White House again. It was just about the same, the light still shining out between the big white columns, but I didn't say anything.

The Major twitched his reins and turned. "Well, boy, we've got work ahead; come on." And he set off at a trot along Pennsylvania Avenue with me beside him.

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Pretty soon we turned south, and the Major twisted around in his saddle and said, "Now, the question is, what do they have in the future?" He held up his finger like a teacher in school, and I believed the part about him being a professor. "We don't know," the Major went on, "but we know where to find it. In a museum. We're going to the Smithsonian Institution, if it's still standing. For us it should be a veritable storehouse of the future."

It had been standing last week, I knew, and after a while, off across the grass to the east, there it was, a stone building with towers like a castle, looking just the same as always, the windows now blank and white in the moonlight. "Still standing, sir," I said.

"Good," said the Major. "Reconnaissance approach, now," and we went on to a cross street and turned into it. Up ahead were several buildings I'd never noticed before, and we went up to them and swung down off our horses. "Walk between these buildings," the Major said, leading his horse. "Quiet, now; we're reconnoitering."

We crept on, quiet as could be, in the shadows between the two buildings. The one to the right looked just like the Smithsonian to me, and I knew it must be a part of it; another building I'd never seen before. The Major was all excited now, and kept whispering. "Some new kind of weapon that will destroy the whole Rebel Army is what we're looking for. Let me know if you see any such thing, boy."

"Yessir," I said, and I almost bumped into something sitting out there in the open in front of the building at the left. It was big and made entirely out of heavy metal, and instead of wheels it rested on two movable belts made of metal; big flat plates linked together.

"Looks like a tank," said the Major, "though I don't know what they keep in it. Keep moving, boy; this thing is obviously no use on a battlefield."

We walked on just a step, and there on the pavement in front of us was a tremendous cannon, three times bigger than any I'd ever seen before in my life. It had an immense long barrel, wheels high as my chest, and it was painted kind of funny, in wavy stripes and splotches, so that you could hardly see it at first in the moonlight that got down between the buildings. "*Look* at that thing!" the Major said softly. "It would pulverize Lee in an hour, but I don't know how we'd carry it. No," he said, shaking his head, "this isn't it. I wonder what they've got inside, though." He stepped up to the doors and peered in through the glass, shading his eyes with his hand. Then he gasped and turned to me.

I went up beside him and looked through the glass. It was a long, big building, the moonlight slanting in through the windows all along one side; and all over the floor, and even hanging from the ceiling, were the weirdest-looking things I ever saw. They were each big as a wagon, some bigger, and

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they had wheels, but only two wheels, near the front; and I was trying to figure that out when the Major got his voice back.

"Aircraft, by God!" he said. "They've got aircraft! Win the war!"

"Air what, sir?"

"*Aircraft.* Flying machines. Don't you see the wings, boy?"

Each of the machines I could see inside had two things sticking out at each side like oversize ironing boards, but they looked stiff to me, and I didn't see how they could flap like wings. I didn't know what else the Major could be talking about, though. "Yessir," I said.

But the Major was shaking his head again. "Much too advanced," he said. "We could never master them. What we need is an earlier type, and I don't see any in here. Come on, boy; don't straggle."

We walked on, leading the horses, toward the front of the other building. At the doors we peeked in, and there on the floor, with tools and empty crates lying around as though they'd just unpacked it, was another of the things, a flying machine. Only this was far smaller, and was nothing but a framework of wood like a big box kite, with little canvas wings, as the Major called them. It didn't have wheels, either, just a couple of runners like a sled. Lying propped against a wall, as though they just were ready to put it up, was a sign. The moonlight didn't quite reach it, and I couldn't read all the words, but I could make out a few. *World's first*, it said in one place, and farther down it said, *Kitty Hawk.*

The Major just stood there for maybe a minute, staring like a man in a trance. Then he murmured to himself, "Very like sketches of Da Vinci's model; only apparently this one worked." He grinned suddenly, all excited. "This is it, boy," he said. "This is why we came."

I knew what he had in mind, and I didn't like it. "You'll never break in there, sir," I said. "Those doors look mighty solid, and I'll bet this place is guarded like the mint."

The Major just smiled, mysterious again. "Of course it is, son; it's the treasure house of a nation. No one could possibly get in with any hope of removing anything, let alone this aircraft — under ordinary circumstances. But don't worry about that, boy; just leave it to me. Right now we need fuel." Turning on his heel, he walked back to his horse, took the reins, and led him off; and I followed with mine.

Off some distance, under some trees, near a big open space like a park, the Major set the lever inside his black box, and pressed the button. "Back in 1864, now," he said then, and sniffed. "Air smells fresher. Now, I want you to take your horse, go to garrison headquarters, and bring back all the petrol you can carry. They've got some for cleaning uniforms. Tell them I'll take full responsibility. Understand?"

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"Yessir."

"Then off with you. When you come back, this is where I want you to meet me." The Major turned and began walking away with his horse.

At headquarters the guard woke a private, who woke a corporal, who woke a sergeant, who woke a lieutenant, who woke a captain, who swore a little and then woke up the private again and told him to give me what I wanted. The private went away, murmuring softly to himself, and came back pretty soon with six five-gallon jugs; and I tied them to my saddle, signed six sets of receipts, and led my horse back through the moonlit streets of Washington, taking a nip of applejack now and then.

I went by the White House again, on purpose; and this time someone was standing silhouetted against the lighted east window — a big man, tall and thin, his shoulders bowed, his head down on his chest — and I couldn't help but get the impression of a weary strength and purpose and a tremendous dignity. I felt sure it was him, but I can't rightly claim I saw the President, because I've always been one to stick to the facts and never stretch the truth even a little bit.

The Major was waiting under the trees, and my jaw nearly dropped off, because the flying machine was sitting beside him. "Sir," I said, "how did you —"

The Major interrupted, smiling and stroking his little beard: "Very simple. I merely stood at the front door" — he patted the black box at the saddle near his shoulder — "and moved back in time to a moment when even the Smithsonian didn't exist. Then I stepped a few paces ahead with the box under my arm, adjusted the lever again, moved forward to the proper moment, and there I was, standing beside the flying machine. I took myself and the machine out by the same method, and my mount pulled it here on its skids."

"Yessir," I said. I figured I could keep up this foolishness as long as he could, though I did wonder how he had got the flying machine out.

The Major pointed ahead: "I've been exploring the ground, and it's pretty rocky and rough." He turned to the black box, adjusted the dial, and pressed the button. "Now, it's a park," he said, "sometime in the 1940's."

"Yessir," I said.

The Major nodded at a little spout in the flying machine. "Fill her up," he said, and I untied one of the jugs, uncorked it, and began to pour. The tank sounded dry when the petrol hit it, and a cloud of dust puffed up from the spout. It didn't hold very much, only a few quarts, and the Major began untying the other jugs. "Lash these down in the machine," he said, and while I was doing that, the Major began pacing up and down, muttering

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to himself. "To start the engine, I should imagine you simply turn the propellers. But the machine will need help in getting into the air." He kept walking up and down, pulling his beard; then he nodded his head. "Yes," he said, "that should do it, I think." He stopped and looked at me. "Nerves in good shape, boy? Hands steady and reliable?"

"Yessir."

"All right, son, this thing should be easy to fly — mostly a matter of balance, I imagine." He pointed to a sort of saddle at the front of the machine. "I believe you simply lie on your stomach with your hips in this saddle; it connects with the rudder and wings by cables. By merely moving from side to side, you control the machine's balance and direction." The Major pointed to a lever. "Work this with your hand," he said, "to go up or down. That's all there is to it, so far as I can see, and if I'm wrong in any details, you can correct them in the air with a little experimenting. Think you can fly it, boy?"

"Yessir."

"Good," he said, and grabbed one of the propellers at the back and began turning it. I worked on the other propeller, but nothing happened; they just creaked, stiff and rusty-like. But we kept turning, yanking harder and harder, and pretty soon the little engine coughed.

"Now, *heave*, boy!" the Major said, and we laid into it hard, and every time, now, the engine would cough a little. Finally, we yanked so hard, both together, our feet nearly came off the ground, and the motor coughed and kept on coughing and like to choked to death. Then it sort of cleared its throat and started to stutter but didn't stop, and then it was running smooth, the propellers just whirling, flashing and shining in the moonlight till you could hardly see them, and the flying machine shaking like a wet dog, with little clouds of dust pouring up out of every part of it.

"Excellent," said the Major, and he sneezed from the dust. Then he began unfastening the horses' bridles, strapping them together again to make a single long rein. He posted the horses in front of the machine and said, "Get in, boy. We've got a busy night ahead." I lay down in the saddle, and he climbed up on the top wing and lay down on his stomach. "You take the lever, and I'll take the rein. Ready, boy?"

"Yessir."

"*Gee up!*" said the Major, snapping the rein hard, and the horses started off, heads down, hoofs digging in.

The flying machine sort of bumped along over the grass on its skids, but it soon smoothed out and began sliding along, level as a sled on packed snow, and the horses' heads came up and they began to trot, the motor just chugging away.

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"Sound *forward!*" said the Major, and I unslung my trumpet and blew forward; the horses buckled into it, and we were skimming along, must have been fifteen, maybe twenty miles an hour or even faster.

"Now, *charge!*" yelled the Major, and I blew charge, and the hoofs began drumming the turf, the horses whinnying and snorting, the engine chugging faster and faster, the propellers whining in back of us, and all of a sudden the grass was a good five feet below, and the reins were hanging straight down. Then — for a second it scared me — we were passing the horses. We were right over their backs; then they began slipping away under the machine, and the Major dropped the reins and yelled, "Pull back the lever!" I yanked back hard, and we shot up into the air like a rocket.

I remembered what the Major had said about experimenting and tried easing back on the lever, and the flying machine sort of leveled out, and there we were, chugging along faster than I'd ever gone in my life. It was wonderful fun, and I glanced down and there was Washington spread out below, a lot bigger than I'd thought it was and with more lights than I'd known there were in the world. They were *bright*, too; didn't look like candles and kerosene lamps at all. Way off, toward the center of town, some of the lights were red and green, and so bright they lighted up the sky.

"Watch out!" yelled the Major, and just ahead, rushing straight at us, was a tremendous monument or something, a tall big stone needle.

I don't know why, but I twisted hard to the left in the little saddle and yanked back on the lever, and a wing heaved up and the flying machine shot off to one side, the wing tip nearly grazing the monument. Then I lay straight again, holding the lever steady. The machine leveled off, and it was like the first time I drove a team.

"Back to headquarters," said the Major. "Can you find the way?"

"Yessir," I said, and headed south.

The Major fiddled with the dial in his black box and pressed the button, and down below now, in the moonlight, I could see the dirt road leading out of Washington back to headquarters. I turned for a last look at the city, but there were only a few lights now, not looking nearly as bright as before; the red and green lights were gone.

But the road was bright in the moonlight, and we tore along over it when it went straight, cut across bends when it curved, flying it must have been close to forty miles an hour. The wind streamed back cold, and I pulled out the white knit muffler my grandma gave me and looped it around my throat. One end streamed back, flapping and waving in the wind. I thought my forage cap might blow off, so I reversed it on my head, the peak at the back, and I felt that now I looked the way a flying-machine driver ought to, and wished the girls back home could have seen me.

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For a while I practiced with the lever and hip saddle, soaring up till the engine started coughing, and turning and dipping down, seeing how close I could shave the road. But finally the Major yelled and made me quit. Every now and then we'd see a light flare up in a farmhouse, and when we'd look back we'd see the light wobbling across the yard and know some farmer was out there with his lamp, staring up at the noise in the sky.

Several times, on the way, we had to fill the tank again, and pretty soon, maybe less than two hours, campfires began sliding under our wings, and the Major was leaning from side to side, looking down at the ground. Then he pointed ahead. "That field down there, boy; can you land this thing with the engine off?"

"Yessir," I said, and I stopped the engine, and the machine began sliding down like a toboggan, and I kept easing the lever back and forth, watching the field come up to meet us, growing bigger and bigger every second. We didn't make a sound now, except for the wind sighing through the wires, and we came in like a ghost, the moonlight white on our wings. Our downward path and the edge of the field met exactly, and the instant before we hit, my arm eased the lever back, and the skids touched the grass like a whisper. Then we bumped a little, stopped, and sat there a moment not saying a word. Off in the weeds the crickets began chirping again.

The Major said there was a cliff at the side of the field and we found it, and slid the machine over to the edge of it and then we started walking around the field, in opposite directions looking for a path or sentry. I found the sentry right away, guarding the path lying down with his eyes closed. My applejack was gone, so I shook him awake and explained my problem.

"How much you got?" he said; I told him a dollar, and he went off into the woods and came back with a jug. "Good whisky," he said, "the best. And exactly a dollar's worth; the jug's nearly full." So I tasted the whisky — it *was* good — paid him, took the jug back and tied it down in the machine. Then I went back to the path and called the Major, and he came over, cutting across the field. Then the sentry led us down the path toward the General's tent.

It was a square tent with a gabled roof, a lantern burning inside, and the front flap open. The sentry saluted. "Major of Cavalry here, sir" — he pronounced the word like an ignorant infantryman. "Says it's secret and urgent."

"Send the *calvary* in," said a voice, pronouncing it just that way, and I knew the General was a horse soldier at heart.

We stepped forward, saluting. The General was sitting on a kitchen chair, his feet, in old Army shoes with the laces untied, propped on a big wooden keg with a spigot. He wore a black slouch hat, his vest and uniform blouse

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were unbuttoned, and I saw three silver stars embroidered on a shoulder strap. The General's eyes were blue, hard and tough, and he wore a full beard. "At ease," he said. "Well?"

"Sir," said the Major, "we have a flying machine and propose, with your permission, to use it against the rebs."

"Well," said the General, leaning back on the hind legs of his chair, "you've come in the nick of time. Lee's men are massed at Cold Harbor, and I've been sitting here all night dri — thinking. They've got to be crushed before — A *flying* machine, did you say?"

"Yessir," said the Major.

"H'mm," said the General. "Where'd you get it?"

"Well, sir, that's a long story."

"I'll bet it is," said the General. He picked up a stub of cigar from the table beside him and chewed it thoughtfully. "If I hadn't been thinking hard and steadily all night, I wouldn't believe a word of this. What do you propose to do with your flying machine?"

"Load it with grenades!" The Major's eyes began to sparkle. "Drop them spang on rebel headquarters! Force immediate surrend —"

The General shook his head. "No," he said, "I don't think so. Air power isn't enough, son, and will never replace the foot soldier, mark my words. Has its place, though, and you've done good work." He glanced at me. "You the driver, son?"

"Yessir."

He turned to the Major again. "I want you to go up with a map. Locate Lee's positions. Mark them on the map and return. Do that, Major, and tomorrow, June 3, after the Battle of Cold Harbor, I'll personally pin silver leaves on your straps. Because I'm going to take Richmond like — well, I don't know what. As for you, son" — he glanced at my stripe — "you'll make corporal. Might even design new badges for you; pair of wings on the chest or something like that."

"Yessir," I said.

"Where's the machine?" said the General. "Believe I'll walk down and look at it. Lead the way." The Major and me saluted, turned and walked out, and the General said, "Go ahead; I'll catch up."

At the field the General caught up, shoving something into his hip pocket — a handkerchief, maybe. "Here's your map," he said, and he handed a folded paper to the Major.

The Major took it, saluted and said, "For the Union, sir! For the cause of —"

"Save the speeches," said the General, "till you're running for office."

"Yessir," said the Major, and he turned to me. "Fill her up!"

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I filled the tank, we spun the propellers, and this time the engine started right up. We climbed in, and I reversed my forage cap and tied on my scarf.

"Good," said the General approvingly. "Style; real calvary style."

We shoved off and dropped over the cliff like a dead weight, the ground rushing up fast. Then the wings bit into the air, I pulled back my lever, and we shot up, the engine snorting, fighting for altitude, and I swung out wide and circled the field, once at fifty feet, then at a hundred. The first time, the General just stood there, head back, mouth open, staring up at us, and I could see his brass buttons gleam in the moonlight. The second time around he still had his head back, but I don't think he was looking at us. He had a hand to his mouth, and he was drinking a glass of water — I could tell because just as we straightened and headed south, he threw it off into the bushes hard as he could, and I could see the glass flash in the moonlight. Then he started back to headquarters at a dead run, in a hurry, I guess, to get back to his thinking.

The machine was snorting at the front end, kicking up at the hindquarters, high-spirited, and I had all I could do to keep her from shying, and I wished she'd had reins. Down below, cold and sparkly in the moonlight, I could see the James River, stretching east and west, and the lights of Richmond, but it was no time for sightseeing. The machine was frisky, trembling in the flanks, and before I knew it she took the bit in her mouth and headed straight down, the wind screaming through her wires, the ripples on the water rushing up at us.

But I'd handled runaways before, and I heaved back on the lever, forcing her head up, and she curved back into the air fast as a calvary mount at a barrier. But this time she didn't cough at the top of the curve. She snorted through her nostrils, wild with power, and I barely had time to yell, "Hang on!" to the Major before she went clear over on her back and shot down toward the river again. The Major yelled, but the applejack was bubbling inside me and I'd never had such a thrill, and I yelled, too, laughing and screaming. Then I pulled back hard, yelling, "Whoa!" but up and over we went again, the wings creaking like saddle leather on a galloping horse. At the top of the climb, I leaned hard to the left, and we shot off in a wide, beautiful curve, and I never had such fun in my life.

Then she quieted down a little. She wasn't broken, I knew, but she could feel a real rider in the saddle, so she waited, figuring out what to try next. The Major got his breath and used it for cursing. He didn't call me anything I'd ever heard before, and I'd been in the calvary since I joined the Army. It was a beautiful job and I admired it. "Yessir," I said when his breath ran out again.

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He still had plenty to say, I think, but campfires were sliding under our wings, and he had to get out his map and go to work. We flew back and forth, parallel with the river, the Major busy with his pencil and map. It was dull and monotonous for both me and the machine, and I kept wondering if the rebs could see or hear us. So I kept sneaking closer and closer to the ground, and pretty soon, directly ahead in a clearing, I saw a campfire with men around it. I don't rightly know if it was me or the machine had the idea, but I barely touched the lever and she dipped her nose and shot right down, aiming smack at the fire.

They saw us then, all right, and heard us, too. They scattered, yelling and cursing, with me leaning over screaming at them and laughing like mad. I hauled back on the lever maybe five feet from the ground, and the fire singed our tail as we curved back up. But this time, at the top of the climb, the engine got the hiccups, and I had to turn and come down in a slow glide to ease the strain off the engine till she got her breath, and now the men below had muskets out, and they were mad. They fired kneeling, following up with their sights the way you lead ducks, the musket balls whistling past us.

"Come on!" I yelled. I slapped the flying machine on her side, unslung my trumpet, and blew charge. Down we went, the engine neighing and whinnying like crazy, and the men tossed their muskets aside and dived in all directions, and we fanned the flames with our wings and went up like a bullet, the engine screaming in triumph. At the top of the curve I turned, and we shot off over the treetops, the wing tip pointing straight at the moon. "Sorry, sir," I said, before the Major could get his breath. "She's wild — feeling her oats. But I think I've got her under control."

"Then get back to headquarters before you kill us," he said coldly. "We'll discuss this later."

"Yessir," I said. I spotted the river off to one side and flew over it, and when the Major got us oriented he navigated us back to the field.

"Wait here," he said when we landed, and he trotted down the path toward the General's tent. I was just as glad; I felt like a drink, and besides I loved that machine now and wanted to take care of her. I wiped her down with my muffler, and wished I could feed her something.

Then I felt around inside the machine, and then I was cussing that sentry, beating the Major's record, I think, because my whisky was gone, and I knew what that sentry had done: sneaked back to my machine and got it soon as he had me and the Major in the General's tent, and now he was back at the guardhouse, probably, lapping it up and laughing at me.

The Major came down the path fast. "Back to Washington, and hurry," he said. "Got to get this where it belongs before daylight or the space-time

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continuum will be broken and no telling what might happen then."

So we filled the tank and flew on back to Washington. I was tired and so was the flying machine, I guess, because now she just chugged along, heading for home and the stable.

We landed near the trees again, and climbed out, stiff and tired. And after creaking and sighing a little, the flying machine just sat there on the ground, dead tired, too. There were a couple of musketball holes in her wings and some soot on her tail, but otherwise she looked just the same.

"Look alive, boy!" the Major said. "You go hunt for the horses, and I'll get the machine back," and he got behind the flying machine and began pushing it along over the grass.

I found the horses grazing not far off, brought them back, and tethered them to the trees. When the Major returned we started back.

Well, I never did get my promotion. Or my wings either. It got hot, and pretty soon I fell asleep.

After a while I heard the Major call, "Boy! Boy!" and I woke up saying, "Yessir!" but he didn't mean me. A paper boy was running over with a newspaper, and when the Major paid for it, I drew alongside and we both looked at it, sitting there in our saddles near the outskirts of Washington. *BATTLE AT COLD HARBOR*, it said, and underneath were a lot of smaller headlines one after the other. *Disaster for Union Forces! Surprise Attack at Daybreak Fails! Repulsed in Eight Minutes! Knowledge of Rebel Positions Faulty! Confederate Losses Small, Ours Large! Grant offers No Explanation; Inquiry Urged!* There was a news story, too, but we didn't read it. The Major flung the paper to the gutter and touched his spurs to his horse, and I followed.

By noon the next day we were back in our lines, but we didn't look for the General. We didn't feel any need to, because we felt sure he was looking for us. He never found us, though; possibly because I grew a beard, and the Major shaved his off. And we never had told him our names.

Well, Grant finally took Richmond — he was a great general — but he had to take it by siege.

I only saw him one more time, and that was years later when he wasn't a general any more. It was a New Year's Day, and I was in Washington and saw a long line of people waiting to get into the White House, and knew it must be the public reception the Presidents used to hold every New Year's. So I stood in line, and an hour later I reached the President. "Remember me, General?" I said.

He stared at me, narrowing his eyes; then his face got red and his eyes flashed. But he took a deep breath, remembering I was a voter, forced a smile, and nodded at a door behind him. "Wait in there," he said.

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Soon afterward the reception ended, and the General sat facing me, behind his big desk, biting the end off a short cigar. "Well," he said, without any preliminaries, "what went wrong?"

So I told him; I'd figured it out long since, of course. I told him how the flying machine went crazy, looping till we could hardly see straight, so that we flew north again and mapped our own lines.

"I found that out," said the General, "immediately after ordering the attack."

Then I told him about the sentry who'd sold me the whisky, and how I thought he'd stolen it back again, when he hadn't.

The General nodded. "Poured that whisky into the machine, didn't you? Mistook it for a jug of gasoline."

"Yessir," I said.

He nodded again. "Naturally the flying machine went crazy. That was my own private brand of whisky, the same whisky Lincoln spoke of so highly. That damned sentry of mine was stealing it all through the war." He leaned back in his chair, puffing his cigar. "Well," he said, "I guess it's just as well you didn't succeed; Lee thought so, too. We discussed it at Appomattox before the formal surrender, just the two of us chatting in the farmhouse. Never have told anyone what we talked about there, and everybody's been wondering and guessing ever since. Well, we talked about air power, son, and Lee was opposed to it, and so was I. Wars are meant for the ground, boy, and if they ever take to the air they'll start dropping bombshells, mark my words, and if they ever do that, there'll be hell to pay. So Lee and I decided to keep our mouths shut about air power, and we have — you won't find a word about it in my memoirs or his. Anyway, son, as Billy Sherman said, war is hell, and there's no sense starting people thinking up ways to make it worse. So I want you to keep quiet about Cold Harbor. Don't say a word if you live to be a hundred."

"Yessir," I said, and I never have. But I'm past a hundred now, son, and if the General wanted me to keep quiet after that he'd have said so. Now, take those hands out of the air, boy! Wait'll the world's *first* pilot gets through talking!

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One of the oldest and noblest traditions of American science fiction is the use of a future setting for the purpose of social commentary on the present — sometimes, as in Edward Bellamy's LOOKING BACKWARD, *extrapolating what the author deems beneficial trends to show us how much better our society could be if we took the thought to make it so; sometimes, as in Jack London's* THE IRON HEEL, *developing the dangerous tendencies of the present to show us how much worse that society may become unless we take thought to arrest its evils. It's the latter form that a regular contributor to the pulp-detective magazines chooses here for his first science fiction story, but with none of London's melodramatic indignation. His prophecy is, perhaps, all the more chilling for being couched in the simple terms of an old lady's disturbing memories.*

Frances Harkins

by RICHARD GOGGIN

JUST THINK. In one week a new century. 2000 A.D. You know it's real funny how a new year always brings her to my mind. I guess most people have forgotten Frances Harkins. Oh, I've heard stories about a few shrines in unlikely places, Massachusetts, Montana, Alabama. You know how the rumors fly. But I've never seen one; and if there are any, I guess the people who know aren't talking. Excuse me, it's time for the 11 A.M. show and I don't want to miss it.

There, that's over. Now I can settle down to writing this. Frances was arrested on December 23, 1972. It seems like yesterday but you know how it is with old ladies' memories. Frances and I worked in the City Hall together for years. I've been retired for a long time myself and I amuse myself writing things like this although I burn them as fast as I write them. I don't know exactly why but it seems to give me a sort of pleasure even though I do burn them. Although there's nothing to be . . . to be afraid of.

My lands, when I think of it! The war with Russia had been over for almost six months. Nobody ever thought it was going to stop. It just seemed to go on and on and on. But one day they told us to go to the television sets at 11 o'clock in the morning (our regular 11 A.M. program is in commemoration of that first show), and there were the monsters surrendering. It was a good clear picture even coming all the way from Yalta.

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It seems funny to me now how anybody could have thought that no one could rule the world. As if the world didn't need ruling. As if we all aren't just children looking up to Old Mother Columbia. Good night nurse, it was that simple. They just kept the war factories going for two more years, and the army took care of passing them around. In two years to the day they had a television set in every home on the face of the earth. And then we all just listened. My, it was exciting!

But I was going to tell you about Frances. I might as well admit it: I always had my suspicions about that woman. Not that she wasn't all right in some ways. Everybody has some good in them, they say. But I'd seen her take eleven and sometimes twelve minutes on the coffee break in the morning. And one of the bosses who'd studied medicine told me no one, absolutely no one, had to go to the ladies' room as often as Frances went. Well, you know, where there's smoke, there's fire.

I can remember the day just as well. And I can remember Frances too. She wasn't any bigger than a minute. But spry, you know? Pert. And she did have the clearest, steadiest blue eyes I've ever seen on a human being.

I remember a long, long time ago when I was a young woman; and Frances and I had just gone to work in the Traffic Fines Bureau. That was the first time they ever asked us to sign anything about loyalty. It seems so silly now. As if there could be any question. Anyway I remember Frances questioning even that first one. I remember she went up to George Peters, our section head, and said, "Do you mean to say, Mr. Peters, that if I don't sign this thing, I'll be fired?"

Well . . . the rest of us just laughed. And Mr. Peters said, "I want all these in by 12 o'clock, you understand me, Miss Harkins?" You should have seen her. Both her cheeks got red as a beet. But she didn't say anything. Why should she? It was only ten to 12 then. Did it take her ten minutes to sign her name? Good night, I kind of pitied her in a way.

She signed it all right. By 12 o'clock too. And she signed all the rest of them too. That woman wasn't fooling me. She knew which side her bread was buttered on.

Well . . . the Russians surrendered in June, '72. My, it was nice to have it over. After living in terror so many years. A body could really think about relaxing. It was after that they declared this . . . what the dickens do you call the darn thing . . . Pex? Pax? Pax, that's it, Pax Americana. I don't know what it means but it sounds elegant, doesn't it? It was funny though. You'd expect people to be pleased and grateful that the war was over. But it wasn't like that. Everyone's temper seemed to get worse. It was the strangest thing. I actually remember one time I nearly snapped back at Mr. Peters himself.

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Anyway, Frances came into the office one day and she looked real happy. I must say my heart warmed to her. She was that nice when she had her good days. She hadn't been sitting at her desk more than two minutes when Mr. Peters came down the aisle.

"Miss Harkins," he said, "if you can spare the time from your other numerous duties, we want you to do some work for us tonight." The people in authority used "we" all the time by '72. It really is very comfortable, like reading the editorial page.

"My dear Mr. Peters," says little Miss Harkins, "in case you haven't heard, the war is over."

Everybody just dropped what they were doing and stared at her. Like I said, we all were kind of jumpy those days, not jumpy exactly, but strange. After all, fifteen years is a long time. You won't believe it but every once in a while I caught myself wishing the war was going on again.

At first Mr. Peters acted as if he hadn't heard her. Then his voice got real low and horrible. "Exactly what difference do you think this makes, Miss Harkins?"

"If I weren't a lady," she says, "I'd tell you what to do with your night work."

We all expected Mr. Peters to lose his temper. At least I did. He just stood there looking at her for nearly a minute. Then he backed off a bit and straightened up. It was real dramatic. "I see," he said. "This makes it all much clearer. We're up against a really tough proposition this time." He looked around the office at all of us and then said, "Exactly how long have you worked for us, Miss Harkins, or whatever you call yourself?"

Frances stepped back from him. "Have you gone batty?" she said. "I've been here since '52, three years before the war started."

He nodded to himself. "It's the incredible patience and ingenuity that terrify you. Go into the next room," he told her. "I have something I wish to tell our people."

She looked frightened but I didn't know what of. We all wanted to hear what Mr. Peters was going to tell us. She looked all around the office at each one of us and then she turned and walked into the next room.

Mr. Peters went over to the door, waited a second, and then pulled it suddenly open. Frances was sitting at the other end of the room, looking out the window. Mr. Peters slammed the door and walked back to the center of the room.

"I have an official communique," he said. "A public announcement will be made tomorrow. But the scene you have just witnessed impels me to read it to you now." He took a Western Union message from his pocket, unfolded it, and read it to us:

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GREETINGS TO THE LONG SUFFERING AND VICTORIOUS AMERICAN PEOPLE. YOU HAVE GALLANTLY BORNE A HERO'S BURDEN THROUGH THE DARK, TERRIBLE YEARS. HOWEVER, IT IS OUR GRIM DUTY TO PASS ON INFORMATION OF THE MOST URGENT NATURE TO YOU. WE HAVE BEEN RELIABLY INFORMED THAT THE PLANET SATURN HAS ONLY BEEN WAITING FOR THE WAR TO END BEFORE IT ATTACKS US. WE OF THE FREE WORLD MUST MEET THIS UNREASONING HATRED AND AGGRESSION FACE TO FACE AND LOOK IT SQUARELY IN THE EYE. WITH HOPE IN OUR HEARTS AND A FIRM BELIEF IN THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF OUR CAUSE, WE MUST ONCE AGAIN TURN TO GOD FOR ASSISTANCE IN DESTROYING THIS NEW THREAT TO MANKIND. NIGHT IS FALLING ALL OVER OUR WORLD. WE CALL UPON YOU IN THE NAME OF TRUTH AND JUSTICE TO GIRD YOUR LOINS IN OUR COMMON DANGER.

Well . . . I guess you know everybody was horrified. But in a way it was kind of a relief. It seemed so natural to see Mr. Peters standing up there so stiff and military looking and everybody else frightened and staring at each other.

"The rest of the communique is top secret," Mr. Peters said. "I can only tell you that our best information points to the fact that Saturnian spies have been living right amongst us." He paused. "For years," he said. He paused again. "They may have been born here."

Everybody just stood there. Finally old Mr. Johnson, who was pretty deaf anyway, piped up from the rear corner by the multigraph machines. "I didn't know they had proven any other planets had people on them."

Mr. Peters didn't even reprimand him. "After all," he said simply, "this is a communique." At least one or two of the rest of us snickered at Mr. Johnson but not Mr. Peters. It's so good to know a man who's really kind to old people.

"I don't want *any* of you," he said, and now he did glance sternly at Mr. Johnson, "to mention this matter to the woman in the next room. I will take care of that myself — at the proper time and with the proper authorities."

I was nearly scared out of my wits. And I understood what he meant about Frances all right. Little things about her came back to me. Like the night we were going to the America Plus rally and that dirty, shabby little man in the trenchcoat leered at us from the alley, winked, and said, "You ladies wanna buy some dirty stories about the truth?" I nearly died but Frances kind of giggled and she bought a couple. She offered to show them to me but after all there are some things a lady just doesn't do. It all began making sense to me and you know, I was kind of sorry, because underneath everything, you just couldn't help yourself liking her now and then.

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The next day of course she was gone; and what a difference it made in the office, having Mr. Peters smiling and everything.

It was only a couple of nights after that I was watching the 8 P.M. City show when they interrupted it to introduce someone important.

> "The City of San Francisco is happy to bring you Dr. Ortho Graham, the distinguished State of California psychiatrist who has just completed the mental examination of the first inter-planetary spy apprehended in this area."

Dr. Graham just scared you stiff to look at him. He looked as if he knew anything, simply anything. He coughed apologetically like they all do and said, "Ah, now really, really, Bob [Bob was the announcer's first name, I guess], it wasn't much of anything. This . . . ah, thing, I rather imagine you'd call it, claims to be a woman named Frances Harkins . . ."

I nearly dropped my post-victory knitting. I knew it, I said to myself, I knew it all the time. Would you ever?

". . . now, Bob, I don't want to baffle our good people with the scientific names of the various complexes and neuroses — upper-, lower-, and inter-planetary — that I discovered in this thing." He laughed a little and Bob laughed with him. "But I'm just going to tell them that it professed not to know one single solitary thing about Alfred Adler's power speculations."

Well . . . I thought Bob would split his sides. It was funny all right . . . I guess. All the State and Federal psychiatrists say that this Dr. Adler was the only smart psychiatrist. But it's like Dr. Graham said, what I don't know about psychiatry would fill a book.

"Thank you, Dr. Ortho Graham," said Bob. "Folks," he said, "that was Dr. Ortho Graham who just completed the first mental examination of an inter-planetary spy. I guess I don't have to tell you people to watch your neighbor, do I? Remember. It's when they don't do anything that they are doing the most. And now . . . on with the show!"

He began playing the record to re-introduce us to the City of San Francisco show and I leaned back slowly and watched the exact center of the screen until I heard Bob's voice saying, "There we are. All comfortable and listening? We're all ready, aren't we?" And then we were in the middle of the City of San Francisco show again and was it ever good!

It couldn't have been more than two or three nights after that when I was sitting in my apartment and the doorbell rang. I nearly jumped out of my skin. It's bad enough in the daytime but at night it's just awful. And when I opened the door, there she was.

"Well, don't stare at me," she said. "I'm no ghost. It's me, Frances."

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I let her in. It was just that underneath everything and in spite of everything, I . . . I wanted to. "But you can't stay here, Frances," I told her. "You can't. I heard about you on the television. Oh, Frances, why did you have to pick me? Good night, I know you're my friend and everything but . . ."

"Look," she said, "just say the word and I'll get right out of here."

"No, no," I whispered, "sit down. Sit down, Frances. I'll fix some tea."

"Thanks. They've been hunting me all over the City. I simply had to get someplace to think a moment."

"Did you escape, Frances?" This made me more suspicious than ever because you just don't escape. Everybody knows that.

"I escaped," she said. "About two hours ago. I think they expect me to make for one of the bridges."

"Frances. Are you really from Saturn?"

"For pete's sake, you've known me for years. Do I look like I came from another planet?"

"No," I said cautiously. But then I remembered. "How can I be sure? How do we know what Saturnians look like? All we know is that they're after us. How can I be sure? How do we know what Saturnians look like? All we know . . ."

She didn't say anything until I stopped. Then she said, "Thanks, thanks for letting me in. The tea tasted good."

"What are you going to do, Frances? You'll never get out of town. Why don't you go back and give yourself up?"

She looked at me a long time I remember before she answered me. Then she seemed to make up her mind about something. "I'm going out on the beach," she said, "and work my way down the coast. It shouldn't be too hard if I take my time about it."

I'm going to write this down quickly before I forget the word again. She'd trusted me. Trusted. There, after all these years. Why, it just seems like yesterday that I used it all the time. Excuse me a moment while I start a little fire for this page.

I remember waiting after she'd left for the impulses toward the police to come. I screamed and tossed all night but in the morning they were less strong and I decided to take a chance on myself outside the house. And in a few days I got so I could walk past a police station without even jerking. I still remember that feeling. We used to call it something that began with a *p*. Prow? No. Principle? No. Whatever was that? Proud. That's it. That's the good one. Proud. But of what? Of whom? I get confused. I'm a very old lady and I hate remembering unpleasant things, I just remembered. You'll have to excuse me tonight. I feel sick . . . real sick . . . and lonely.

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Well . . . here I am, back again and fresh as a daisy. What was I writing? Oh, yes, about Frances. She didn't get away, of course. They caught her on the beach and brought her back for the investigations. Nobody knew what went on. The investigations had been secret for years. Naturally none of us was allowed inside the Hall of Justice Building.

It only took two weeks and then the announcement of the television trial came out in all the papers. They don't use the newspapers except for things like public announcements. Stuff you can't copy down from the television. It's funny about the newspapers. You'd think you'd miss them. But you don't. What you miss are the voices talking to you and the pictures moving.

They gave us the whole day off for it. This was the first time they actually declared a public holiday for a trial like this and everybody was just as excited as anything. We all hustled home and got in a good night's sleep. You couldn't have kept us away from our television sets with a team of wild horses.

I can see it just like it was yesterday. And besides I took down real verbatim notes of the whole thing. Naturally it was all military. Oh, they looked so fine in their uniforms. The Opera House was just littered with flags, our flags. And such a spirit of unanimity. I'll never forget it.

Frances wore some kind of simple black dress and she'd drawn her long, blonde hair straight back. The Opera House is so big; and the cameras make everything look so big; and the crowd was cheering so much. She looked very tiny standing there in the witness box.

The Defense Attorney was a scream. We all knew he was pretending of course but they know it makes life more exciting if they let us pretend. Well . . . this Defense Attorney must have come straight out of a TV workshop. He was that good. Gestures, tears, everything. I'm telling you, if anybody was on the street, they could have heard the audience all the way out to the beach. What a character! Even the judge laughed a couple of times.

I remember her standing up straight, gripping the rail of the box with both hands while the Prosecuting Attorney from the Judge Advocate General's Office made his charges. She kept looking straight into his eyes and I guess the lighting in the Opera House must have been bothering him or something because he turned away quite frequently. I'll never forget one part of the questioning, the one where she was supposed to break down and confess. Wait a minute, I've got it here among my notes somewhere. Where the dickens? Oh, here it is!

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: . . . now, come, you mean to stand there and tell us you don't owe your allegiance to another planet?

FRANCES: Of course not.

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PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: I suppose the next thing you're going to tell us is that you love this World?

FRANCES: I don't love you. I'll tell you that.

JUDGE: The defendant will refrain from injecting personal opinion into the testimony.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: Do you deny repeatedly provoking a certain Mr. Peters, your immediate and lawful superior?

FRANCES: No. That is . . .

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: That's enough. Thank you. An excellent example of what our good Dr. Adler would have called a true slip of the tongue.

FRANCES: I was just going to say that isn't all I wanted to do to him.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: Ladies and Gentlemen of the TV audience, you have just heard from the prisoner's own lips an expression of the arrogant brutality for which Saturn is infamous.

FRANCES: Is this your idea of justice?

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: I wish to call the Court's attention to the sly, twisted fashion in which the defendant attempts to slander this Court.

JUDGE: Thank you, counsel. It will be in the defendant's interest to remember that she is on trial for her life.

FRANCES: I . . .

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: I do not think I have any further questions for the defendant. I feel confident that the prosecution has established beyond any reasonable doubt the existence of a foreign mentality, alien and hateful to any standards of justice and truth in our USA World.

FRANCES: I . . .

JUDGE: Are you or are you not guilty of the charges brought against you?

FRANCES: I confess. . . . [*There was a tremendous hubbub in the Opera House, flashlight bulbs popping, people shouting, with the brightest spotlights and direct air currents playing on our Flags.*]

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: Kindly move the last four cameras in closer. That's it. Thank you.

FRANCES: I disagree with you.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: Really? Please proceed with your confession.

FRANCES: That's it.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: Your Honor, never in 30 years of legal practice have I listened to more contemptuous treatment of a Court than that of this prisoner. I call upon you to preserve this Court's dignity.

JUDGE: I agree with counsel completely. In the light of the evidence and in a sincere conviction of my duty as a human being and citizen of this USA World, I do sentence the defendant to death for . . .

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You could have heard a pin drop. The cameras swept all around the Opera House slowly and every single person was on the edge of their seats. And then he did it . . .

Everybody else can say all they want to, and I've talked this over with a lot of people. None of them will admit he did it but I was listening and looking just as hard as I could and I heard him. And I saw the grimace he made when he covered it up. I may be an old lady and a little crazy to be sitting here writing stuff like this down on paper but I heard him. They can call on their old Dr. Adler or whoever they want to.

He was speaking right directly into the middle microphone on the Opera House stage and he said, ". . . for disagree—" Well . . . it seemed as if everybody in the Opera House just caught their breath. But he recovered right away, and said, "for seeking the violent overthrow of this USA World."

I suppose I should be scared out of my wits looking at that awful word after all these years. *Disagree*, he said. Right out. And him a judge and all.

I heard him, I tell you. With my own ears. My own ears! What am I saying? My own . . . my own . . . well, I did. They *are* my own ears. I don't care if I'm crazy or not. Because I remember two things. I did let her in and I didn't go to the police. And I'm old now and it doesn't seem to matter so much so I'm just going to write it all down again and hide the papers in the apartment; and I'm *not* going to burn them; and maybe someone . . . sometime. . . .

Recommended Reading

This issue was prepared in the summer, when the publishing business is always in the doldrums (particularly, it seems, in the field of science fiction; there are always enough mysteries to justify a year-round weekly column). As of this writing, we know of no adult books to recommend to you aside from the reprint of Jack Williamson's effective blend of science fiction and detective-suspense, DRAGON'S ISLAND (Popular). Younger readers — and even older ones new to the field — should enjoy Andre Norton's STAR MAN'S SON: 2250 A.D. (Harcourt, Brace). This is a "juvenile" much closer in intent to Heinlein's series for Scribner's (the latest of which, due out around the time you read this, we urge upon you even without seeing it) than to the trash which other publishers have put out as "teen-age science fiction".

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You automatically think of gladiatorial arenas as titanic stadiums, like something begotten by Cecil B. DeMille out of the Arizona meteor crater. But obviously a small tanktown arena must have borne about the same relation to the Roman Colosseum as your neighborhood movie house does to the Radio City Music Hall. For the only study we know of a typical small-time arena in the sticks, we are indebted (as for so much else!) to the researches of Professor Cleanth Penn Ransom, that prime pragmatist whose slogan in investigating any of his myriad theories is, "Let's argue about it after we see whether it'll work." His machine for recalling ancestral memories does indeed work — to produce a compendium of knowledge on the two-bit circuits of gladiature, a pretty and insoluble problem in genealogy . . . and the unforgettable Pipula, the Amazon who proves that one sufficiently appealing item may be enough in a field in which popular fiction has always emphasized the necessity for two.

The Unidentified Amazon

by H. NEARING, JR.

"Do you know who said this?" Professor Cleanth Penn Ransom, of the Mathematics Faculty, bent over the book on his desk and read aloud:

Und keine Zeit und keine Macht zerstückelt
Geprägte Form, die lebend sich entwickelt.

Professor Archibald MacTate, of Philosophy, waved a hand blandly. "Oh, Goethe."

Ransom looked up at him. "My God, that's right. How'd you know that?"

"Well, it rimes, doesn't it?" MacTate smiled. "And it's in German. Anything in German that rimes must be Goethe. It could hardly be Dante." He uncrossed his long legs and leaned forward. "Go over it a bit slower, and I'll tell you what it means."

Ransom shook his head. "This is too tough for you, MacTate. I better translate it. Let's see. *And no Time and no Might . . . mangles, chatters . . . stamped-out Form, which, living, itself develops. Develops itself*, that is. Nothing can shatter identity." He nodded at the book. "Pretty good. You believe that?" He looked up at his colleague.

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MacTate pursed his lips. "It all depends on what you mean by identity," he said. "Platonically speaking —"

"Oh, the hell with Plato." Ransom closed the book and leaned back in his swivel chair. "Let me tell you what Ransom has to say on the subject." He jabbed a thumb into his little belly and began to swing back and forth.

"Excuse me," said MacTate sarcastically. "I didn't know you had it all figured out."

"As a matter of fact," said Ransom, "I don't. Not all of it. But" — he stopped swinging and faced MacTate — "I think I've got a way to find out something about it. Look." He held up his right hand. "Why am I right-handed?" He wiggled the fingers. "Because my center of gravity's on the right side of my body? Not at all. There's plenty of left-handed people whose center of gravity's on the right. But if I'm subconsciously remembering the way most of my ancestors used their hands —"

"But, Ransom. Acquired characteristics can't —"

"But tendencies *can*." Ransom aimed a finger at his colleague. "How do you explain the fact that I'm scared of the dark? Am I just skittish, or did I get it from someplace?"

MacTate looked thoughtful. "Well, I suppose you might inherit tendencies of that sort."

"All right." Ransom began to swing again. "Now. How about these little boys you read about that go into a trance and start talking Old Persian or something, and —"

"Talk what?"

"Well, some ancient language or other. They —"

"You've heard them yourself?"

"Well, no. But you hear about them. If you get right down to it, it isn't much different from remembering to use your right hand or to be scared of the dark. Is it? And if they can do that" — Ransom spread his hands — "Why shouldn't we be able to talk some Neolithic patois, maybe? If we could figure out a way to remember it?"

"My dear Ransom —"

"Now look, MacTate." Ransom opened his bottom desk drawer. "There's no sense arguing about it, because I've got the proof right here. One way or another." He took a tangle of wires out of the drawer, threw it on the desk, and began to straighten it out. It consisted of a metal box, of about one cubic foot, to which were wired a floor plug and two metal skullcaps topped with electrodes. "Here. I put this little cap on my head and plug it in, and —"

"But you have two caps there." MacTate looked at his colleague warily. "Ransom. You're not thinking —"

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"Of course there's two caps. One person by himself wouldn't know whether he'd dreamed his ancestors' lives or not. So you have to have one for the — control. Two people wouldn't be very likely to have the same dream simultaneously. Would they?"

MacTate started to say something about Peter Ibbetson and the Brushwood Boy, but reflected on the circumstances and decided not to press the point. He looked at the two skull caps. "I take it you haven't tried this out yet."

"No. I just —"

"And I suppose you intend to be the first to wear one of those caps."

"Sure. I —"

"But who" — MacTate looked at him with almost poignant suspicion — "is going to be your 'control'?" One corner of his mouth turned down. "As if I didn't know."

Ransom grinned. "Good for you, MacTate. I was hoping you'd volunteer."

"Ransom, you —"

"Look, MacTate, we're wasting time. Don't argue about it. Just sit over here —"

"But how —?" MacTate gestured toward the apparatus.

"Look." Ransom put down the skullcaps and leaned back in his chair. "You know how they shock catatonics to get them back to normal. With insulin, for instance, or that camphor stuff. Makes their brains relive the whole embryonic process — fish, chickens, all those things. Well, we don't want to go back quite that far in an evolutionary sense, but we want to go a lot farther back in . . . historical identity. So I fixed these skullcaps to sort of shock the brain out of its immediate identity by sending out waves that upset the rhythm of your cortical vibrations." He waved a hand over his head demonstratively. "It gives you a sort of electric — well, in music they call it a beat note. And that stirs up centers of what you might call memory tendency. See?"

"But, Ransom. For the two of us —"

"Now don't worry about that." Ransom pointed to the metal box. "See this thing? It's a compatibility tube."

"A what?"

"Compatibility tube. It's sensitive to identical micro-electro . . . Well, anyway, if we've ever met before, this thing will make us remember it. Before this century."

"But —"

"Let's argue about it after we see whether it'll work." Ransom got up, put one of the skullcaps on MacTate and the other on himself, and stuck

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the plug into a floor socket. Then he sat down again. "You just" — he turned a switch on the metal box — "sit there and relax, and . . ."

Ransom the German — Redemptio Germanicus he was called in the Illyrian town of Salona on the Adriatic — put his elbows on a battered table in the lion's stall that served him for an office and rested his jaw disconsolately in his hands. His partner, MacTate the Gaul — Filiuscapitis Gallicus — leaned forward on his bench and drew recondite curves in the sand with a rusty sword.

"This is terrible, MacTate. What are we going to do about tomorrow's show?" Ransom picked up a leather bag that lay on the table and spilled out its contents. "About twenty denarii. That's all that's left. And even if Hyacinthus hadn't run out on us —"

"You shouldn't have made those remarks about his archery, Ransom. He was quite a sensitive chap. Especially since his best days were over."

"Well, his worst days are over now, too. The Ransom-MacTate Arena is the end of the road for gladiators." Ransom sighed. "What a business. You know, MacTate, sometimes I think I should have been a mathematician. I love to count things." He grinned. "Especially money." His grin soured as he looked down at the coins. "If we hadn't flunked out of gladiator school we might have —"

"Well now, Ransom. If we hadn't, we'd probably be covered with glory in a grave somewhere by this time." MacTate scratched out his designs and stuck the sword upright beside the bench. He smiled. "Perhaps I should have been a philosopher."

"You couldn't have been much poorer than you are now." Ransom nodded lugubriously. He looked at his partner. "MacTate, you've got to think of something. For tomorrow, I mean. I give up. There's nobody in town we don't owe money to, and there hasn't been a new —"

A shadow fell across the sunlit threshold of the stall. Ransom and MacTate looked up. Peering at them around the gatepost, an astonishing distance above the ground, was a handsome if somewhat rat-like face.

"You Ransom and MacTate?" The newcomer stepped into the stall and glanced from one to the other. "I've just finished an engagement at . . . Pompeii" — he turned and spit expertly into a corner — "and decided to take a little vacation over this way. I didn't know you had an arena here." He looked out the door at the unkempt little circle of sand that constituted the Ransom-MacTate investment. It was clear from the way he looked that he had used the word *arena* as a matter of courtesy. He turned back to Ransom and MacTate. "How would you like to feature a big name in your show? I want to keep in practice, and I could lower my rates to —"

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"Well now, we might be able to arrange something." Ransom's eyes began to gleam. "What did you say your name was?"

"Taurus. Taurus the Lydian." He said it a little too quickly. "I've met —"

"What's your specialty?"

"Secutor. But of course I can handle the net." Taurus waved a hand deprecatingly. "If you need a retiarius —"

"Well, we could leave that to the challengers. There'll be more of them if you're versatile."

"Challengers?" Taurus leaned against the gatepost and bent his head dubiously to one side. "I don't know as I'd like to murder the customers. Might start —"

"Wait." Ransom held up a hand and smiled. "I better warn you while we're on the subject. No killing in this arena. Except by accident, of course. The prefect won't stand for it. He's also the flamen, and he's got it in his head that if everybody sees too much blood in the arena, they won't get a proper thrill out of his sacrifices. You know how it is out in these places."

"But that only makes it worse." Taurus frowned. "Sometimes you can't help maiming the local talent. When they're trying to be heroes. Don't you have your own boys? Anybody would do as long as they're professional."

Ransom put his hands on the table, spread out his fingers and looked at them intently. "Frankly, Taurus, we're operating on a rather slim budget right now. Number of outside investments we've made that haven't paid off yet, you know. You'd have to settle for a percentage of the proceeds, with no guarantees. I know that's not what you're used to. On the other hand —"

"Hello." The voice was feminine, sultry and rather breathless. Ransom and MacTate looked up. Taurus was gaping down at a woman whose red hair, glowing with a sunbeam, reached about half way between his elbow and his shoulder. She had a cowlick that flopped wantonly over her forehead, a wide mouth, and lithe arms and legs. Where her right breast should have been, there was a white scar, but the swell of her garment as it rose to the opposite shoulder betokened a certain compensation. She stepped into the stall and smiled uncertainly.

"I'm looking for a job."

Taurus grinned sardonically. MacTate raised his eyebrows.

Ransom's mouth fell open. "What?"

"You must be Ransom. The promoter." She went over to him, raised one knee, and sat on the edge of the table. "I've heard a lot about you."

Ransom's eyes narrowed. "What are you doing here?"

"I told you." She brushed the cowlick out of one eye. "I want a job."

Ransom glowered at her, raised his arm and pointed in the direction of the waterfront. "The best place for you to find a job —"

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"Ransom." MacTate leaned forward. "Perhaps the young lady has been misdirected. This is an arena, my girl. A place where men of the male sex — that is to say, gladiators of the male sex — fighters, you know — this is a place where they . . . fight. Now if you could tell us where you —"

"I know it's an arena." The girl turned to MacTate and widened her eyes at him. "That's why I came here. I'm a gladiator, too. Of the female sex." She mimicked the accents of his explanation.

"A gladi —" Ransom scowled. "Listen. I don't know what you're after, but —"

"I am so a gladiator." The girl stood up and faced him. "I've been in more fights than —"

"Where were you in any fights?" said Ransom.

Taurus roared out an enthusiastic laugh in appreciation of his employer's retort. The girl looked at him dirtily. She turned back to Ransom. "Plenty of places. Not around here. Back East, where they know how to put on a real show. If you want —" She stopped, noticing that Ransom's eyes were fixed on her right breast. "Sure. Look at that." She pointed to the scar. "That's my recommendation. All Amazons have their right breast cut off, so their sword arm —"

"You mean you're an Amazon?" Ransom stared at her.

"Sure. What did you think I was? A —"

"Then what are you doing in Illyria?" He aimed an accusing finger at her.

Taurus laughed again. The girl threw him an impatient glance. "Well, I mean I used to be one. But I got . . . kidnaped by pirates, and when I escaped I was . . . here." She waved vaguely at the environs. "That's why I need a job. I —"

"No, no." Ransom shook his head. "The prefect's an old woman. Keeps yapping at us about just a little manly roughness. If we went and used a girl —" He looked at her. "What could we do with you?"

"You could throw her to an ape," said Taurus.

The girl twisted one corner of her mouth. She sighed. Turning, she sauntered over to Taurus. He stopped laughing and eyed her warily.

She put her hands on her hips and looked up at him. "That's quite a laugh you've got," she said.

He looked down at her without replying. Though he still leaned carelessly against the gatepost, his muscles looked somehow ominously alert.

"What was it you said they ought to do with me?" said the girl quietly.

Taurus grinned. "Give you to an ape."

"Who would that be? You?"

Taurus sneered nastily and stood straight. "Listen —!"

She turned to Ransom. "You know, he's got something there, Ransom,"

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she said. "I could fight him." She snapped her fingers. "Look. Watch this."

Wheeling suddenly, she lowered her head and butted Taurus violently in the midriff. He emitted a hoarse wheeze and reached out to grab her. Dropping sideways, she pivoted on her hands to swing her body at his shins. He leaped over her, spun around, and lunged at her again. Ducking under his outstretched hands, she bit him on the back of the arm, just above the elbow, and slipped behind him. He let forth a howl. Cursing, he swung around — to find the point of MacTate's rusty sword pressed against his abdomen. She twisted the sword a little to assure him of his position. He smiled, though his fingers were twitching.

"Let's find another sword," he said. "I'll show you a trick."

"Now listen." Ransom came to them, knocked the sword out of the girl's hand, and pushed them apart. "Taurus and — you. What's your name?"

"Pipula."

"All right. Now listen. You've got to get it through your heads that there's a tough prefect in this town. What if he'd looked in here just now? It's bad enough —"

"Oh, just let us finish this pass," said Taurus, advancing toward Pipula. "I won't hurt her. Only a little bit."

"MacTate." Ransom stood in front of Pipula and pushed Taurus back. "You show Taurus here around the . . . grounds while I get rid — I mean, I want to talk to Pipula about her . . . qualifications." He pushed Taurus to the gate.

"I'll take him down the street for some wine," said MacTate. "Cool him off. You . . . ah . . ." He looked at the denarii on the table.

"Oh, yes," said Ransom. "You left your change over here." He put the coins into the leather bag and gave it to MacTate. "I'll probably join you in a few minutes." He looked darkly at Pipula. "So don't drink too fast." His laugh was somewhat forced.

When MacTate showed the tavern-keeper his denarii, the latter bit one of them, looked at Taurus suspiciously, and poured two bowls of wine. Taurus downed his without stopping for breath. MacTate looked at him, shrugged, and ordered another. On the third bowl, Taurus slowed down. Between gulps he entered upon a more or less analytical comparison of the wine at hand with all the other wines he could remember drinking. When half the denarii were gone, Ransom had still not come. MacTate stood up.

"Perhaps we'd better see what's keeping Ransom," he said. "That little — what's her name? Pipula. She — That is, I'm not sure —"

Taurus agreed with him. He got up and led the way out of the tavern.

Back in the lion's stall they found Ransom lying prone on the bench, drawing numbers in the sand with MacTate's sword.

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"Did you have much trouble getting rid of her?" said MacTate.

Ransom grunted. He scratched out the numbers in the sand.

"Why didn't you follow us? To the tavern? After what she did to Taurus, I didn't know —"

"MacTate." Ransom rolled over and sat up. "When you come to think of it — I mean, don't you think —? What I mean is, after all, why should we bow down to the prefect's whims all the time? Now you take this show tomorrow, for instance. If we were to post announcements that Taurus was fighting — well, to take a hypothetical example, let's say this Amazon, or whatever you want to call her — now wouldn't that have an . . . exotic appeal? We might clean up on it, for all we know. And then what would we care what the prefect thought?"

Taurus muttered a few tipsy obscenities apropos of the subject.

MacTate pursed his lips. "I don't know, Ransom. I still like the idea of Taurus taking on challengers. Women — well, I don't know." He looked at Ransom and caught him glancing furtively at something under the bench. Following the glance, he saw a diminutive pair of sandals.

"Just put her in the arena with me," said Taurus. "Just give me a chance at her. She can have the sword. I'll squeeze her out of her skin. I'll —"

"Ransom." MacTate gestured toward the sandals.

Ransom looked apprehensively at Taurus. "MacTate, maybe Taurus would like some more wine. Why don't you —?"

"Well. Here you are again." Pipula entered the stall and slipped into the sandals. She looked at Ransom. "Is it all settled?"

Taurus began to growl. She looked at him, and a wicked gleam came into her eye.

"MacTate. Look." Ransom grabbed Taurus by the arm and pulled him to the gateway. "I'll take Taurus this time. You argue with her." He motioned for the coin bag.

MacTate tossed it to him. He sighed. "I'll be with you shortly."

When they were gone, he turned to Pipula. "Now, young lady, I don't like to be unkind, but I must say that I myself am somewhat opposed to exposing women to the vicissitudes of the arena. Not that I'm narrow-minded, but —"

"MacTate." Pipula stood close to him and hung her head. "I know why you don't like me. It's because I'm . . . mutilated. Isn't it?" She touched the scar on her breast.

MacTate found himself blushing. "My dear young lady —"

"I can't think of any other reason why you wouldn't want me to work for you. It's not as if it were something I could help. Is it?"

"Now see here, Pipula. You know very well —"

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"I'm rather attractive otherwise, don't you think? I'm healthy, and well-proportioned, and . . . strong. Look." She took his hand, put it on her biceps, and looked up at him inquiringly. "Don't you think?" Her cowlick tickled his chin.

MacTate was, as he had guessed, a philosopher at heart. Bowing philosophically to the inevitable, he finally agreed to employ Pipula as Taurus's opponent. Ransom, returning to the stall to report that he had deposited Taurus safely in one of the waterfront houses, commented sarcastically on his partner's failure to join the drinking party, but showed no surprise. It was almost as if he too had turned philosophical Pipula put on her sandals again and went out with the two philosophers to supper.

The next morning there were excited rumors astir in the town. The conjectures arising from the somewhat lurid notice chalked on the front gate of the arena had been repeated as fact, and then served, in turn, to generate new conjectures. At the scheduled starting-time that afternoon, the seats surrounding the arena were packed beyond Ransom's fondest hope. It was a raucous, volatile crowd, displaying several crews of piratical-looking sailors of varicolored garments and complexions. In the midst of their brawling sat a gaunt, stern man with heavy eyelids, a long nose, and a mouth like a pair of millstones. Taurus and Pipula recognized him for the prefect before Ransom pointed him out.

After the salute, Taurus stretched his arms happily, raising shield and sword, and turned to Pipula, who tossed off her robe and stood deliciously naked, except for one or two scanty concessions to propriety. The crowd gasped. Smiling wickedly, she began to dance around Taurus, feinting with her trident and her net.

Suddenly he slashed out murderously with his sword so fast that the crowd could not follow the blow. There was a second or two of silence, and then the arena was filled with delighted roaring. There was no blood on Pipula's dazzling skin.

Taurus shook his head disgustedly. He rushed at Pipula and followed her dodges relentlessly, trying to drive her against the wall. Finally she turned and ran from him, and in his rage he chased her around the ring several times. But his armor was too heavy for racing, and he could not approach her. Stopping, he banged his sword on his shield petulantly and called her an indelicate name. She danced toward him, grinning.

"My, Taurus, what a brute you are. You do this to all your victims?"

Taurus's eyes glittered under his helmet. He smiled coldly. "Look, sweetheart. Look at those clouds up there. It's going to rain in a few minutes."

Pipula had noticed that the sky was growing dark. She kept her eyes on Taurus. "What do I care? I don't have anything to get wet."

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"But everybody will be going home. You don't want to spoil their fun, do you? Stand still and let me carve you up."

"Sure. Go right ahead."

Taurus slashed out with his sword again. As Pipula slipped aside, he swung his shield at her. She danced nimbly away and laughed. Taurus stood flat-footed and lowered his shield. "Look. You fight me awhile."

Pipula regarded him appraisingly. The weight of the armor was clearly slowing him down. She smiled, as if about to reply. Then, with a flick of her wrist, she sent her net flying at his head. He tried to duck, but it caught on his sword and swung around over his helmet. As he struggled to free his sword, Pipula raised her trident and dashed in at him.

Suddenly, from the clouds overhead, streaked a long bright bolt of lightning. It struck the ground a few yards behind Pipula with a nerve-shattering thunderclap. She dropped her trident and reeled away from it.

Taurus recovered first. Releasing his entangled sword, he threw off the net, took his shield from his arm and hurled it at Pipula. It struck her squarely and knocked her over. Leaping to her side, Taurus set the shield on top of her and brought his knee down on it.

"Taurus—!" She gasped and looked up at him wild-eyed. He grinned savagely and brought his knee down on the shield again.

"Taurus. The prefect—"

"Don't worry about the prefect, sweetheart. There won't be any blood at all." He leaned over and grinned in her face. "I'm just going to pulverize you. Internally."

"Taurus—!"

Pipula, as Ransom and MacTate had learned, was a remarkable woman. Even in her present position she was able to use her voice and her eyes to advantage. They insinuated a reproach to Taurus, an imputation of sadistic oafishness, as if he were torturing a baby.

"You've been asking for this," he said stubbornly. He brought his knee down on the shield again, but not quite so hard as before.

He looked at her eyes and felt a pang of guilt again. He looked at her mouth and wondered if he ought to be satisfied with capitulation. The prefect would stop the fight.

A large raindrop splattered on Pipula's left eye. She tried to blink it away. Without thinking, Taurus took one hand off the shield to brush it away for her. As she felt the pressure on her shifting, Pipula rolled with it. Taurus felt himself losing his balance and tried to hold the shield steady, but it was too late. Twisting her body violently, Pipula was loose. She bounced to her feet, snatched up her trident and net, and flung Taurus's sword, which she shook from the net, into the stands.

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Taurus gaped at her. "You gave —" He stopped, remembering that she had not given up. Furthermore, she had disarmed him. As she sprang toward him, he grabbed up his shield and began trying to maneuver her against the wall. But it was hard for him to concentrate. He felt somehow that he had been cheated, and that it was his own fault, and he wanted to kick himself for it and Pipula too. Dimly, he was able to recognize the emotion. He had had it before.

The raindrops were splashing heavily over the whole arena by this time. The overcast had grown quite dark. As Taurus and Pipula circled about, another lightning bolt thundered down, striking the wall near the prefect's seat, and suddenly the raindrops turned into hailstones.

There were howls from the crowd. Pipula, whose condition was particularly vulnerable, threw her net at Taurus and ran to the lion's stall, where Ransom and MacTate stood watching their production.

"Turn your backs while I put on some clothes," she said.

Ransom looked at her. "That would bother you?"

She jerked her head toward the gateway. "Taurus will be coming in, too." She smiled. "We don't want to corrupt clean-living youth."

Taurus, whose armor made an exit less urgent, had paused to salute the prefect before leaving the arena. That worthy, however, had scampered with the rest of the crowd to more sheltered parts. Taurus looked around at the deserted seats, shrugged, and tramped into the lion's stall.

He leaned his shield against the gatepost and gestured at Pipula, who was pinning on the final brooch.

"What does she think she's doing?"

Ransom grinned. "She says she doesn't want to corrupt you."

"But she'll just have to take them off again." Taurus looked out at the arena. "It's stopped hailing. Just a little rain. Before long they'll be coming back, and —"

Ransom put his hand on Taurus's shoulder. "Look, Taurus. Do I tell you how to handle a sword? You let me handle the show. They paid their admission and left, didn't they? Now they can just pay again tomorrow to see the rest of it." He looked out at the sky speculatively. "I wish there was some way to make it hail every—"

"Ransom." MacTate, at the table, had arranged the admission coins in three piles. He handed the smallest one to Pipula and the next to Taurus, scooped the largest into the leather bag, and turned to his partner. "Were you watching the prefect during the engagement?"

"Oh, sure. But he always looks that way. Don't worry about him. Look, Taurus —"

Taurus, who had taken off his armor and started to leave, turned around.

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He jingled the coins in his hands with good-natured impatience.

"Tomorrow, same time. Keep out of trouble."

Taurus looked at Pipula, then at Ransom. He grinned, nodded, and left.

Ransom shook his head wonderingly. "That's a mighty big boy there." He turned to Pipula. "I thought it was the end of you when he started to jump on that shield."

Pipula got a far-away look in her eye. "Sometimes the big ones are the easiest to handle," she said dreamily. Suddenly she noticed Ransom and MacTate staring at her. She made a contemptuous face and shrugged. "He didn't worry me."

Ransom smiled with puzzled amusement. "What's got into you, Pipula? You sound as if you enjoyed getting crushed. Did you think —?"

"That reminds me." Pipula put her hands on her stomach. "How about restoring some of the energy he crushed out of me? I'm hungry. Let's —"

"Greetings."

Pipula and her employers turned toward the gate. Ransom and MacTate recognized the newcomer. He was a centurion in the prefect's guard. He came into the stall, eyed Taurus's armor lying in the corner, and grinned at Pipula. "Quite a show this afternoon."

Pipula smiled back. Ransom sat down uneasily at the table. "We always try to give the town the best talent available," he said.

The centurion looked at him. "You outdid yourselves today," he said dryly. "This new boy you have. What's his name?"

Ransom and MacTate looked at him without answering. They sensed he was not referring to the name chalked on the arena gate.

The centurion shrugged. "Brave boy, whoever he is. I know I wouldn't trust *my* swordsmanship against such perilous charm." He bowed gallantly to Pipula and turned back to Ransom and MacTate. "Has he been in town long?"

Ransom waved his hands. "We only hire them. We don't write their biographies." He looked at the centurion narrowly. "Why don't you ask him what you want to know?"

The centurion laughed ingratiatingly. "Good heavens, Ransom. I was just making conversation." He went to the gate. "I came down here to congratulate him. Thought he'd still be here. But the visit wasn't entirely wasted." He bowed to Pipula again. "I'll catch him another time. I suppose he'll be fighting the . . . lady again soon?"

"Just watch the gate notices," said Ransom. He blinked superciliously. "We don't care to make rigid plans too far ahead."

"All right." The centurion nodded and went to the gate. "By the way," he said, "I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anybody I was here. You see,

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I'm supposed to be on duty." He grinned at Pipula. "It's been a stolen pleasure." He turned and left.

Ransom looked at MacTate. "Now, what —?"

"Listen," said Pipula, going to the gate and looking after the centurion. "If you don't mind, I think I'll eat alone this time."

Ransom stared at her. "But I thought —"

"Well, I've changed my mind. There's . . . something I have to do. Don't worry about me. I'll be on hand tomorrow." She looked again to make sure the centurion was out of sight. "Sorry."

"Pipula —"

She was gone.

The partners looked at each other. Ransom shrugged.

MacTate hefted the bag of coins. "Well, let's go eat, old boy. She was right about that fight. I got depleted just watching them."

When they ordered supper, the tavern-keeper smiled at them for the first time they could remember. "Hear you fellows made a hit this afternoon," he said. "Sorry I couldn't be there to see it. You're going to put on a return bout, I guess?"

Ransom looked at him importantly. "We'll see. One of these days, maybe. Maybe tomorrow."

The tavern-keeper looked at him slyly. "You better hurry up, if you ask me."

The partners looked up at him. "What do you mean?" said Ransom.

The tavern-keeper smiled knowingly. "You hear a lot of talk," he said. "Most of it's just talk, but you can usually tell when something's in the air."

Ransom frowned. "What's in the air?"

"Well, this boy of yours. What's his name? The prefect's centurion was here looking for him a little while ago. And a couple of sailors said —"

"What did he want with him?" said Ransom.

The tavern-keeper scratched his head. "He didn't say exactly. Something about having a message for him. But these sailors —"

"Well, why didn't he tell me that?" Ransom scowled at the tavern-keeper. "I'm his employer, not you. If he had a message, why didn't he give it to me?"

The tavern-keeper looked at him. "I can't say as I know just why he didn't." His eyes grew large and rather angry. "But I'll tell you this. Everybody was saying it was mighty funny a big-time gladiator like that should all of a sudden have to go to work in your —" His expression supplied the noun. "You better keep your eye on him, if you ask me." He turned his fat shoulders coldly and went to get their food.

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The tavern-keeper's insinuation inspired Ransom with an emotion akin to motherly protectiveness. By the end of supper he had convinced himself, despite uncoöperative doubts on MacTate's part, that his protégé was the victim of invidious and unwarranted backbiting. MacTate, philosophically yielding to his partner's optimism, eventually brought up the problem of how to spend their unaccustomed wealth, and they passed the rest of the evening arguing about its disposal.

When Ransom chalked up the notice on the gate the next morning — a statement that there would be a show that afternoon, with a sketch of a leering wink — an effluvium of anticipation spread through the atmosphere of the town. Ransom, sniffing it, began to dream of villas in Etruria and orgies with chilled wine. When the crowd began to fill the arena more than an hour before starting time, his visions became too dazzling to bear, and he suddenly remembered that neither Taurus nor Pipula had come to the arena all morning. He laughed at the flash of panic that struck him with the recollection. There was no good reason why they should have come to the arena earlier. No doubt they had become absorbed in exploring a town that was new to them.

But as the starting time came closer, Ransom began to feel a vague uneasiness somewhere in his mind. Trying to analyze it, he discovered that the crowd was the cause. Not its size, for it was bigger than the arena had ever held, but something in its quality. Something missing from it. Suddenly it hit him. The prefect was not there.

This discovery made him aware that his gladiators were by now well overdue. He began to feel panicky again. Finally he turned the admissions box over to his equally anxious partner and ran down to the tavern to see if Taurus was there.

The tavern-keeper's face bore an evil I-told-you-so look. "Not here," he said, shaking his head happily. "But your — the female was in here. Last night. Told me to give you this." He held out a small piece of slate with minute scratches on it.

Ransom took it and looked at it closely. The scratches were letters. It was a note from Pipula, in Pontine Greek. Laboriously he spelled it out:

Ransom and MacTate, a sorrowful farewell. I hope you won't think too badly of me for deserting you, as I am in the grip of the Ate and cannot answer for my actions. Since the moment when Cassidus (whom you knew as Taurus) tried to crush me with his shield, I knew I could not live without him. That must sound foolishly sentimental to you, but there it is. In Rome he had the misfortune to kill the brother of your prefect, over dice or something of the sort as he told me. Busybodies who knew of this were fated to arrive in Salona by ships sailing with his, and the prefect, as you may have guessed, seeks his life. We are on our way

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to the corners of the earth to make a new life together. I shall often think of you.

When Ransom showed the slate to his partner, MacTate sighed and looked from the admissions box to the crowd inside. "Maybe we'd better join them," he said.

"Join them? What are you talking about? Join who?"

"Pipula and Taurus, or whatever his name is. Right now we're somewhat lynchable ourselves."

Ransom looked at the crowd and gasped. "MacTate. What are we going to do?"

MacTate shrugged. "You might go pick a fight with the tavern-keeper and get him to chase you back here."

"Jokes." Ransom kicked the gate. "Here we are as good as murdered, and all you can do is make jokes. If you —"

"Well, do you have a better idea? As I see it, we can either run away, which is probably more sensible, or put on the show ourselves."

"But, MacTate, they'd tear us apart. If we went out there when they're expecting Pipula —"

MacTate looked at the crowd. "They'll probably do that anyway. If you're too proud to run away."

"Well, I am." Ransom stood up straight and listened to an imaginary trumpet call. "Come on, MacTate. We'll go down doing our duty to the public." He eyed the crowd thoughtfully. "Anyway, we don't have a head start like . . . them. This way we just might have a chance."

MacTate sighed and got up. The partners closed the arena gate and went to their lion's stall.

When the crowd saw them saluting the commander of the garrison, there was an awful silence in the arena. When MacTate, naked, with trident and net, and Ransom, armored, with sword and shield, faced each other and squared off, a babble of angry mutters rose from the seats. Suddenly a clear sense of having been cheated flooded the crowd, and it let forth lusty howls of indignation.

"Come on, MacTate. Let's mix it up. They've caught on." Ransom charged at his partner with raised sword. MacTate, twisting away, dragged his net behind him. Suddenly Ransom found his feet enmeshed in the net. MacTate tried to rip it away, but succeeded only in throwing his partner heavily to the ground. He stood over Ransom's supine figure, gaping incredulously at the result of his accidental prowess. The crowd screamed with rage.

"MacTate. Don't just stand there. Jab at me."

MacTate looked startled. Raising his trident, he began to ping gingerly at the more solid portions of Ransom's armor.

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"No, no." Ransom rolled over and scrambled to his feet. As he turned to face MacTate, he heard something whiz past his ear. From the corner of his eye, he saw the missile strike the ground and bounce across the sand. It was a rotten orange.

"MacTate. Did you throw that?"

MacTate ducked. Ransom saw a stone bounce behind his partner. He looked up at the crowd. "They've started already. Let's keep moving."

MacTate turned and ran up to the other end of the arena. Ransom followed him, brandishing his sword. "Look, MacTate. Let's really mix it up. Maybe they'll stop."

MacTate faced him and nodded. Dropping his net, he swung his trident with both hands in a great arc at the level of Ransom's shoulders. Ducking, Ransom swung his sword in an opposing arc. But both his timing and his aim were faulty. The trident and the sword met with a great clank at their respective points of percussion and rebounded crazily through the air. MacTate hugged his hands to his chest and cringed over them. Ransom dropped his shield, grasped his sword arm with the other hand, and howled. Suddenly two or three stones struck his armor and bounced off. He saw MacTate wince and hop up and down.

"MacTate. Hurry up. We've got to keep moving."

They scrambled to pick up their weapons. When they faced each other, Ransom waved the trident angrily at his partner. "MacTate. Look at that. You've got my sword. Why —?" He noticed the weapon in his own hand. "Oh, well." He jabbed at MacTate half-heartedly. "Look at that. Not a cloud in the sky. And if there was ever a time for it to hail —"

From the seats above came a shower of stones. MacTate grabbed up Ransom's shield and held it between himself and the crowd. He began to jab back at Ransom with the sword.

"Look out!" Ransom saw a sandal flying at his partner's unprotected side. MacTate looked up and jumped away from it without halting his jabs. Ransom, at the same instant, noticed a wooden board flying at his head from the other direction. He stepped aside without lowering his trident.

Suddenly the partners looked at each other incredulously. The prongs of the trident were imbedded in MacTate's midriff. The point of the sword was somewhere inside Ransom's throat. Simultaneously they let go their weapons and stepped back.

"My God, MacTate, what happened? I didn't —"

"I don't know, old boy. But it's probably better than the stones. Here. Pull out the sword so you'll —"

"But, MacTate. We didn't plan it *this* way. How did —? Oh, my God." Ransom opened his eyes.

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MacTate was sitting placidly across the desk with his eyes closed. The metal skullcap was poised precariously on the back of his head, about to fall off. Ransom's skullcap was already on the floor. He pulled out the plug and began to wind up the wires.

MacTate opened his eyes and blinked sleepily. Then he started and looked at Ransom curiously. "I say, Ransom. What's the matter? What happened to your armor?"

Ransom pointed at him. "Look at yourself. What happened to your — nudity?"

"Look here, old boy. Am I crazy or have we just murdered each other?" MacTate looked around the room. Whatever was in his mind, he decided definitely against it. "This certainly doesn't look like —."

Ransom laughed. "We only remembered killing each other. As our own ancestors, about 2000 years ago. Remember?" He waved at the black box.

"Then it did work." MacTate's eyes brightened. "Who would have thought?" He looked at the black box. "Just imagine how many gruesome situations you could get yourself into with that thing."

Ransom leaned back in his swivel chair and started to swing. "On the other hand," he said, "think how many Pipulas you might meet."

"See what I mean?" MacTate smiled. "But I'll agree with you that that situation was gruesome with a difference." He looked thoughtfully over Ransom's head. "Pipula," he muttered. He looked at Ransom again. "Tell me, old boy. Speaking of Pipula, do you recall being married at all? It seems to me that neither of us —"

"Married?" Ransom stopped swinging. "I don't know." He scowled in concentration. "I don't think. . . . No, I'm sure I wasn't. That is, — Look, MacTate. What are you getting at? How do I know whether —"

"Do you remember having any children?" MacTate was absolutely serious.

Ransom frowned at him. "Of course I don't. Did you see any around the arena? You know perfectly well —"

"Then tell me this." MacTate leaned forward. "How do you account for our descent?"

"Descent?" Ransom looked puzzled. "Why, I don't. Account for it. How do you account for anybody's descent? They just — descend." He aimed a finger at his colleague. "Look, MacTate. What's all this about, anyway? We might have got married later on, for all you know. You don't —"

"But how could we, when we killed each other?"

"My God." Ransom sank back in his chair. "That's right. That would make *her* —"

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MacTate nodded. "Our great, great, great and so on grandmother."

Ransom stared at him. "No, wait a minute." He sat up and shook a finger at MacTate. "She couldn't be an ancestor of both of us. You were your ancestor, and I was mine. And how long was she around? Only —"

"But that's it, old boy." MacTate shrugged. "If you're descended from Ransom the German and I'm descended from MacTate the Gaul, there has to be a maternal line for each of us. How would we get those memory cells in our brains otherwise? Do you see?"

Ransom stared at him again. "No, no, MacTate. Look." He pulled open his top desk drawer and took out a tablet and a pencil. "Now I'm *x* and you're *y*." He wrote the letters on the tablet. "Just to simplify the problem, let's say that Ransom the German and MacTate the Gaul are only — let's say three generations back. Now." He drew two diverging lines above each letter. "Here's my mother and father, *x*-sub-one and *x*-sub-two. Odd numbers will be feminine. And here's yours, *y*-sub-one and *y*-sub-two. That's the second generation back. Now for the third — well, let's say that *y*-sub-four — that's MacTate the Gaul — is the father of *y*-sub-one by — no. Let's say that *y*-sub-four is the father of *y*-sub-two. And *y*-sub-two's mother is *y*-sub-three. Right? And *x*-sub-two's father is *x*-sub-four — that's Ransom the German — and his mother is *x*-sub-three. So *y*-sub —"

"Just a moment, Ransom." MacTate leaned over and pointed to the tablet. "You have to make *x*-sub-three and *y*-sub-three the same person. There was only one Pipula, you know."

"All right, all right. I'm coming to that. You see —" Ransom stared at the tablet. Suddenly he tore off the top sheet and threw it into the wastebasket. "Look. We'll start over again. My God, we *are* here, aren't we? Look. Let *x* equal Ransom the Gaul — Ransom the German, rather — and *y* . . ."

Note:

If you enjoy THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, you will like some of the other MERCURY PUBLICATIONS:

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In one of the best novels to date in the hard-cover science fiction boom, TAKEOFF *(Doubleday, 1952), C. M. Kornbluth demonstrated that he could do two things exceedingly well: write first-level science fiction, about the immediately foreseeable future, which is more fascinating than the most involved projections of remote vastness; and create a novel which does not appeal strictly to science fiction readers, but which can stand on its literary merits as a representative of the quality fiction of the future. Both of these virtues, as desirable as they are rare, appear in this study of the goodly creatures who, however brave may be the world around them, will still find themselves trapped in the mazes which man can design far more cruelly for himself than for any rat.*

The Goodly Creatures

by C. M. KORNBLUTH

How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in 't!

Miranda in The Tempest

FARWELL suddenly realized that his fingers had been trembling all morning, with a hair-fine vibration that he couldn't control. He looked at them in amazement and rested them on the keys of his typewriter. The tremor stopped and Farwell told himself to ignore it; then it would go away. The copy in the typewriter said: *Kumfyseets — add 1* in the upper left-hand corner and under it: *— hailed by veteran spacemen as the greatest advance in personal comfort and safety on the spaceways since —*

Since what? It was just another pneumatic couch. Why didn't he ever get anything he could *work* with? This one begged for pix — a stripped-down model in a Kumfyseet, smiling under a pretended seven-G takeoff acceleration — but the Chicago Chair Company account didn't have an art budget. No art, and they were howling for tear-sheets already.

— comfort and safety on the spaceways since —

He could take Worple to a good lunch and get a shirt-tail graf in his lousy "Stubby Says" column and that should hold Chicago Chair for an-

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other week. They wouldn't know the difference between Worple and—

Farwell's intercom buzzed. "Mr. Henry Schneider to see you about employment."

"Send him in, Grace."

Schneider was a beefy kid with a practiced smile and a heavy handshake. "I saw your ad for a junior copywriter," he said, sitting down confidently. He opened an expensive, new-looking briefcase and threw a folder on the desk.

Farwell leafed through it — the standard presentation. A fact sheet listing journalistic honors in high school and college, summer jobs on weeklies, "rose to sergeantcy in only ten months during U.M.T. period." Copies of by-line pieces pasted neatly, without wrinkles, onto heavy pages. A TV scenario for the college station. A letter from the dean of men, a letter from the dean of the journalism school.

"As you see," Schneider told him, "I'm versatile. Sports, travel, science, human-interest, spot news — anything."

"Yes. Well, you wouldn't be doing much actual writing to start, Schneider. When —"

"I'm glad you mentioned that, Mr. Farwell. What exactly would be the nature of my work?"

"The usual *cursus honorum* —" Schneider looked blank and then laughed heartily. Farwell tried again: "The usual success story in public relations is, copy boy to junior copywriter to general copywriter to accounts man to executive. If you last that long. For about three months you can serve Greenhough and Brady best by running copy, emptying waste baskets and keeping your eyes open. After you know the routine we can try you on —"

Schneider interrupted: "What's the policy on salaries?" He didn't seem to like the policy on promotions.

Farwell told him the policy on salaries and Schneider tightened his mouth disapprovingly. "That's not much for a starter," he said. "Of course, I don't want to haggle, but I think my presentation shows I can handle responsibility."

Farwell got up with relief and shook his hand. "Too bad we couldn't get together," he said, talking the youngster to the door. "Don't forget your briefcase. If you want, you can leave your name with the girl and we'll get in touch with you if anything comes up. As you say, you might do better in another outfit that has a more responsible job open. It was good of you to give us a try, Schneider . . ." A warm clap on the shoulder got him out.

Next time, Farwell thought, feeling his 45 years, it would be better to mention the starting salary in the ad and short-stop the youngsters with

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inflated ideas. He was pretty sure he hadn't acted like that beefy hotshot when he was a kid — or had he?

— *comfort and safety on the spaceways since* —

He turned on the intercom and said: "Get me Stubby Worple at the *Herald*."

Worple was in.

"Jim Farwell, Stub. I was looking at the column this morning and I made myself a promise to buzz you and tell you what a damn fine job it is. The lead graf was sensational."

Modest protests.

"No, I mean it. Say, why don't we get together? You got anything on for lunch?"

He did, but how about dinner? Hadn't been to the Mars Room for a coon's age.

"Oh. Mars Room. Sure enough all right with me. Meet you in the bar at 7:30?"

He would.

Well, he'd left himself wide open for that one. He'd be lucky to get off with a $30 tab. But it was a sure tear-sheet for the Chicago Chair people.

Farwell said to the intercom: "Get me a reservation for 8 tonight at the Mars Room, Grace. Dinner for two. Tell Mario it's got to be a good table."

He ripped the Kumfyseets first ad out of the typewriter and dropped it into the waste basket. Fifty a week from Chicago Chair less 30 for entertainment. Mr. Brady wasn't going to like it; Mr. Brady might call him from New York about it to say gently: "Anybody can *buy* space, Jim. You should know by now that we're not in the business of buying space. Sometimes I think you haven't got a grasp of the big picture the way a branch manager should. Greenhough asked about you the other day and I really didn't know what to tell him." And Farwell would sweat and try to explain how it was a special situation and maybe try to hint that the sales force was sometimes guilty of overselling a client, making promises that Ops couldn't possibly live up to. And Mr. Brady would close on a note of gentle melancholy with a stinging remark or two "for your own good, Jim."

Farwell glanced at the clock on his desk, poured one from his private bottle; Brady receded a little into the background of his mind.

"Mr. Angelo Libonari to see you," said the intercom. "About employment."

"Send him in."

Libonari stumbled on the carpeting that began at the threshold of Farwell's office. "I saw your ad," he began shrilly, "your ad for a junior copywriter."

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"Have a seat." The boy was shabby and jittery. "Didn't you bring a presentation?"

He didn't understand. "No, I just saw your ad. I didn't know I had to be introduced. I'm sorry I took up your time —" He was on his way out already.

"*Wait* a minute, Angelo! I meant, have you got any copies of what you've done, where you've been to school, things like that."

"Oh," The boy pulled out a sheaf of paper from his jacket pocket. "This stuff isn't very good," he said. "As a matter of fact, it isn't really finished. I wrote it for a magazine, *Integration*, I don't suppose you ever heard of it; they were going to print it but they folded up, it's a kind of prose poem." Abruptly he ran dry and handed over the wad of dog-eared, interlined copy. His eyes said to Farwell: *please don't laugh at me.*

Farwell read at random: "— and then the Moon will drift astern and out of sight, the broken boundary that used to stand between the eye and the mind." He read it aloud and asked: "How, what does that mean?"

The boy shyly and proudly explained: "Well, what I was trying to bring out there was that the Moon used to be as far as anybody could go with his eyes. If you wanted to find out anything about the other celestial bodies you had to guess and make inductions — that's sort of the whole theme of the piece — liberation, broken boundaries."

"Uh-huh," said Farwell, and went on reading. It was a rambling account of an Earth-Ganymede flight. There was a lot of stuff as fuzzy as the first bit, there were other bits that were hard, clean writing. The kid might be worth developing if only he didn't look and act so peculiar. Maybe it was just nervousness.

"So you're specially interested in space travel?" he asked.

"Oh, very much. I know I failed to get it over in this; it's all second-hand. I've never been off. But nobody's really written well about it yet —" He froze.

His terrible secret, Farwell supposed with amusement, was that he hoped to be the laureate of space flight. Well, if he wasn't absolutely impossible, Greenhough and Brady could give him a try. Shabby as he was, he wouldn't dare quibble about the pay.

He didn't quibble. He told Farwell he could get along on it nicely, he had a room in the run-down sub-Bohemian near north side of town. He was from San Francisco, but had left home years ago — Farwell got the idea that he'd run away — and been in a lot of places. He'd held a lot of menial jobs and picked up a few credits taking night college courses here and there. After a while Farwell told him he was hired and to see the girl for his withholding tax and personnel data forms.

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He buzzed his copy chief about the boy and leaned back in good humor. Angelo could never get to be an accounts man, of course, but he had some talent and imagination. Tame it and the kid could grow into a good producer. A rocket fan would be handy to have around if Sales stuck Ops with any more lemons like Chicago Chair.

Worple drank that night at the Mars Room like a man with a hollow leg and Farwell more or less had to go along with him. He got the Kumfyseets item planted but arrived at the office late and queasy as McGuffy, the copy chief, was bawling out Angelo for showing up in a plaid shirt, and a dirty one at that.

McGuffy came in to see him at 4:30 to ask about Angelo. "He just doesn't seem to be a Greenhough and Brady man, J. F. Of course if you think he's got something on the ball, that's good enough for me. But, honestly, can you see him taking an account to lunch?"

"Is he really getting in your hair, Mac? Give him a few days."

McGuffy was back at the end of the week, raging. "He showed me a poem, J. F. A sonnet about Mars. And he acted as if he was doing me a favor! As if he was handing me a contract with Panamerican Steel!"

Farwell laughed; it was exactly what he would expect Angelo to do. "It was his idea of a compliment, Mac. It means he thinks you're a good critic. I know these kids. I used to —" He broke off, dead-pan.

McGuffy grumbled: "You know I'm loyal, J. F. If you think he's got promise, all right. But he's driving me nuts."

After the copy chief left, Farwell shook his head nervously. What had he almost said? "I used to be one myself." Why, so he had — just about 25 years ago, a quarter of a century ago, when he went into radio work temporarily. *Temporarily!* A quarter-century ago he had been twenty years old. A quarter-century ago he had almost flunked out of college because he sat up all night trying to write plays instead of studying.

He hazily remembered saying to somebody, a girl, something like: "I am aiming for a really creative synthesis of Pinero and Shaw." Somehow that stuck, but he couldn't remember what the girl looked like or whether she'd been impressed. Farwell felt his ears burning: "A really creative synthesis of Pinero and Shaw." What a little pest *he* must have been!

He told the intercom: "Send in Libonari."

The boy was more presentable; his hair was cut and he wore a clean blue shirt. "I've had a couple of complaints," said Farwell. "Suppose we get this clear: you are the one who is going to conform if you want to stay with us. Greenhough and Brady isn't going to be remolded nearer to the heart's desire of Angelo Libonari. Are you going out of your way to be difficult?"

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The boy shrugged uneasily and stammered: "No, I wouldn't do anything like that. It's just, it's just that I find it hard to take all this seriously — but don't misunderstand me. I mean I can't help thinking that I'm going to do more important things some day, but honestly, I'm trying to do a good job here."

"Well, honestly you'd better try harder," Farwell said, mimicking his nervous voice. And then, more agreeably: "I'm not saying this for fun, Angelo. I just don't want to see you wasted because you won't put out a little effort, use a little self-discipline. You've got a future here if you work with us instead of against us. If you keep rubbing people the wrong way and I have to fire you, what's it going to be? More hash-house jobs, more crummy furnished rooms, hot in the summer, cold in the winter. You'll have something you call 'freedom,' but it's not the real thing. And it's all you'll have. Now beat it and try not to get on Mr. McGuffy's nerves."

The boy left, looking remorseful, and Farwell told himself that not everybody could handle an out-of-the-way type that well. If he pasted the little sermon in his hat he'd be all right.

"Really creative synthesis!" Farwell snorted and poured himself a drink before he buckled down to planning a series of releases for the International Spacemen's Union. The space lines, longing for the old open-shop days, were sniping at the I.S.U. wherever they found an opening. They had a good one in the union's high initiation fee. The union said the high fee kept waifs and strays out and insured that anybody who paid it meant business and would make the spaceways his career. The union said the benefits that flowed from this were many and obvious. The companies said the union just wanted the money.

Farwell started blocking out a midwestern campaign. It might start with letters to the papers signed by SPACEMAN'S WIFE, WIDOW OF SCAB SPACER and other folks; the union could locate them to sign the letters. Next thing to do was set up a disinterested outfit. He tentatively christened it "The First Pan-American Conference on Space Hazards" and jotted down the names of a few distinguished chronic joiners and sponsors for the letterheads. They could hold a three-day meeting in Chicago, and conclude that the most important factor in space safety is experienced crewmen, and the longer their service the better. No mention of the I.S.U. initiation fee policy out of the F.P.A.C.S.H., but the union could use their conclusions in *its* material.

The union could use it to get a couple of state legislatures to pass resolutions endorsing the intiation fee policy. He'd write the resolutions, but the I.S.U. — an independent union — would have to swing the big federations into putting pressure on the legislatures in the name of labor unity.

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Numerically the spacemen were insignificant.

He pawed through stacks of material forwarded to him as ammo by the union looking for the exact amount of the fee but couldn't locate it. The coyness was not surprising; it recalled the way corporation handouts bannered the "profit per dollar of sales" and buried the total profit in dollars and cents. He buzzed Copy.

"Mac, does anybody there know exactly what the I.S.U. initiation fee is?"

"I'll see, J. F."

A moment later he heard Angelo's voice. "It's kind of complicated, Mr. Farwell — maybe to keep anybody from saying it's exactly this or exactly that. Here's the way it works: base fee, $1000, to be paid before they issue you a work card. What they call 'accrual fee' on top of that — $100 if you're twenty years old, $200 if you're twenty-two, $300 if you're twenty-four and so on up to 30, and after that you can't join. You can pay accrual fee out of your first voyage. *From* the accrual fee you can deduct $50 for each dependent. On top of that there's a 5 per cent assessment of your first-voyage pay only, earmarked for the I.S.U. Space Medicine Research Foundation at Johns Hopkins. And that's all."

Farwell had been jotting it down. "Thanks, Angelo," he said absently. The Space Medicine Research thing was good, but he'd have to be careful that they weren't represented at the F.P.A.C.S.H.; you didn't want a direct union tie-in there. Now what could you do about the fee? Get the union to dig up somebody who's paid only the $1000 base because of age and the right number of dependents. Forget the accrual and the assessment. How many people on a space ship — 50, 60? Make it 60 to get a plausibly unround number. Sixty into 1000 is $16\frac{67}{100}$.

"Dear Editor: Is there anybody riding the spaceways who would not cheerfully pay $16.67 cents to insure that the crewmen who hold his life in their hands are thoroughly experienced veterans of interplanetary flight? Is there anybody so short-sighted that he would embark with a green crew to save $16.67? Of course not! And yet that is what certain short-sighted persons demand! Throwing up a smoke-screen of loose charges to divert the public from the paramount issue of *SAFETY* they accuse —"

That wasn't exactly it. He had made it look as though the passengers paid the I.S.U. initiation fee. Well, he'd struck a keynote; Copy could take it from there.

And then there ought to be a stunt — a good, big stunt with pix possibilities. Girls, or violence, or both. Maybe a model demonstrating an escape hatch or something at a trade show, something goes wrong, a heroic I.S.U. member in good standing who happens to be nearby dashes in —

He was feeling quite himself again.

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The switchboard girl must have been listening in on the New York call. As Farwell stepped from his office he felt electricity in the air; the word had been passed already. He studied the anteroom, trying to see it through Greenhough's eyes.

"Grace," he told the switchboard girl, "get your handbag off the PBX and stick it in a drawer somewhere. Straighten that picture. And put on your bolero — you have nice shoulders and we all appreciate them, but the office is air-conditioned."

She tried to look surprised as he went on into Art.

Holloway didn't bother to pretend. "What time's he getting in?" he asked worriedly. "Can I get a shave?"

"They didn't tell me," said Farwell. "Your shave's all right. Get things picked up and get ties on the boys." The warning light was off; he looked into the darkroom. "A filthy mess!" he snapped. "How can you get any work done in a litter like that? Clean it up."

"Right away, J. F.," Holloway said, hurt.

Copy was in better shape; McGuffy had a taut hand.

"Greenhough's coming in today, I don't know what time. Your boys here look good."

"I can housebreak anything, J. F. Even Angelo. He bought a new suit!"

Farwell allowed a slightly puzzled look to cross his face. "Angelo? Oh, the Libonari boy. How's he doing?"

"No complaints. He'll never be an accounts man if I'm any judge, but I've been giving him letters to write the past couple weeks. I don't know how you spotted it, but he's got talent. I have to hand it to you for digging him up, J. F."

Farwell saw the boy now at the last desk on the windowless side of the room, writing earnestly in longhand. Two months on a fair-enough salary hadn't filled him out as much as Farwell expected, but he did have a new suit on his back.

"It was just a gamble," he told McGuffy and went back to his office.

He had pretended not to remember the kid. Actually he'd been in his thoughts off and on since he hired him. There had been no trouble with Angelo since his grim little interview with the boy. Farwell hoped, rather sentimentally, he knew, that the interview had launched him on a decent career, turned him aside from the rocky Bohemian road and its pitfalls. As he had been turned aside himself. The nonsensical "really creative synthesis of Pinero and Shaw" pattered through his head again and he winced, thoroughly sick of it. For the past week the thought of visiting a psychiatrist had pattered after Pinero and Shaw every time, each time to be dismissed as silly.

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His phone buzzed and he mechanically said, "Jim Farwell."

"Farwell, why didn't you check with me?" rasped Greenhough's voice.

"I don't understand, Mr. Greenhough. Where are you calling from?"

"The Hotel Greybar down the street, of course! I've been sitting here for an hour waiting for your call."

"Mr. Greenhough, all they told me from New York was that you were coming to Chicago."

"Nonsense. I gave the instructions myself."

"I'm sorry about the mixup — I must have misunderstood. Are you going to have a look at the office?"

"No. Why should I do anything like that? I'll call you back." Greenhough hung up.

Farwell leaned back, cursing whoever in New York had crossed up the message. It had probably been done deliberately, he decided — Pete Messler, the New York office manager trying to make him look bad.

He tried to work on an account or two, but nervously put them aside to wait for Greenhough's call. At 5 he tried to reach Greenhough to tell him he was going home and give him his home number. Greenhough's room didn't answer the call or his next four, so he phoned a drugstore to send up a sandwich and coffee.

Before he could get started on the sandwich Greenhough phoned again to invite him to dinner at the Mars Room. He was jovial as could be: "Get myself some of that famous Chicago hospitality, hey, Jim? You know I'm just a hick from Colorado, don't you?" He went on to give Farwell about ten minutes of chuckling reminiscence and then hung up without confirming the dinner date. It turned out that it didn't matter. As Farwell was leaving the deserted office his phone buzzed again. It was Greenhough abruptly calling off the Mars Room. He told Farwell: "I've got somebody important to talk to this evening."

The branch manager at last dared to pour himself a heavy drink and left.

His bedside phone shrilled at 3 in the morning. "Jim Farwell," he croaked into it while 2 clock dials with the hands making two luminous L's wavered in front of him. His drink at the office had been the first of a series.

"This is Greenhough, Farwell," snarled the voice of the senior partner. "You get over here right away. Bring Clancy, whatever his name is — the lawyer." *Click.*

Where was "here"? Farwell phoned the Greybar. "*Don't* connect me with his room — I just want to know if he's in." The floor clerk said he was and Farwell tried to phone the home of the Chicago branch's lawyer, but got no answer. Too much time lost. He soaked his head in cold water, threw his clothes on and drove hell-for-leather to the Greybar.

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Greenhough was in one of the big two-bedroom suites on the sixteenth floor. A frozen-faced blond girl in an evening gown let Farwell in without a word. The senior partner was sprawled on the sofa in dress trousers and stiff shirt. He had a bruise under his left eye.

"I came as quickly as I could, Mr. Greenhough," said Farwell. "I couldn't get in touch with —"

The senior partner coughed thunderously, twitched his face at Farwell in a baffling manner, and then stalked into a bedroom. The blond girl's frozen mask suddenly split into a vindictive grin. "*You're* going to get it!" she jeered at Farwell. "I'm supposed to think his name's Wilkins. Well, go on after him, pappy."

Farwell went into the bedroom. Greenhough was sitting on the bed dabbing at the bruise and muttering. "I told you I wanted our lawyer!" he shouted at the branch manager. "I was attacked by a drunkard in that damned Mars Room of yours and by God booked by the police like a common criminal! I'm going to get satisfaction if I have to turn the city upside-down! Get on that phone and get me Clancy or whatever his name is!"

"But I *can't!*" said Farwell desperately. "He won't answer his phone and in the second place he isn't that kind of lawyer. I *can't* ask Clarahan to fight a disorderly-conduct charge — he's a big man here. He only does contract law and that kind of thing. You posted bond, didn't you, Mr. Greenhough?"

"Twenty dollars," said the senior partner bitterly, "and they only wanted ten from that drunken ape."

"Then why not just forget about it? Forfeit the bond and probably you'll never hear of it again, especially since you're an out-of-towner. I'll do what I can to smooth it over if they don't let it slide."

"Get out of here," said Greenhough, dabbing at the bruise again.

The blond was reading a TV magazine in the parlor; she ignored Farwell as he let himself out.

The branch manager drove to an all-night barber shop near one of the terminals and napped through "the works." A slow breakfast killed another hour and by then it wasn't too ridiculously early to appear at the office.

He dawdled over copy until 9 and phoned the Greybar. They told him Mr. Greenhough had checked out leaving no forwarding address. The morning papers came and he found nothing about a scuffle at the Mars Room or the booking of Greenhough. Maybe the senior partner had given a false name — Wilkins? — or maybe the stories had been killed because Greenhough and Brady did some institutional advertising. Maybe there was some mysterious interlock between Greenhough and Brady and the papers high up on some misty alp that Farwell had never glimpsed.

Don't worry about it, he told himself savagely. You gave him good ad-

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vice, the thing's going to blow over, Clarahan wouldn't have taken it anyway. He hoped Pete Messler in New York wouldn't hear about it and try to use it as a lever to pry him out of the spot he held, the spot Pete Messler coveted. Maybe there was some way he could get somebody in the New York office to keep an eye on Messler and let him know how he was doing, just to get something he could counterpunch with when Messler pulled something like that garbled message stunt.

The intercom buzzed and Grace said, "Angelo wants to see you. He says it's personal."

"Send him in."

The kid was beaming. He looked pretty good — not raw and jumpy; just happy.

"I want to say thanks and good-bye, Mr. Farwell," he told the branch manager. "Look!"

The plastic-laminated card said "WORK PERMIT" and "Brother Angelo Libonari" and "International Union of Spacemen, Spacedockworkers and Rocket Maintenance Men, Unaffiliated (ISU-IND)" and "Member in Good Standing" and other things.

"So that was the game," said Farwell slowly. "We take you and we train you at a loss hoping that some day you'll turn out decent copy for us and as soon as you have a thousand bucks saved up you quit like a shot and buy a work card to be a wiper on a rocket. Well, I hope you show a little more loyalty to your space line than you showed us."

Angelo's face drooped in miserable surprise. "I never thought —" he stuttered. "I didn't mean to run out, Mr. Farwell. I'll give two weeks notice if you want — a month? How about a month?"

"It doesn't matter," said Farwell. "I should have known. I thought I pounded some sense into your head, but I was wrong. You're forgiven, Angelo. I hope you have a good time. What are your plans?" He wasn't really interested, but why go out of his way to kick the kid in the teeth? Obviously he'd meant it when he registered surprise — he didn't have the boss's viewpoint and his other jobs had been one-week stands in hashhouses.

The boy carefully put his work card in his breast pocket and beamed again at what he was saying — partly to Farwell, it appeared, mostly to himself in wonder at its coming true at last. "I'll be a wiper at the start, all right," he said. "I don't care if I never get higher than that. I want to see it and feel it, all of it. That's the only way the real thing's ever going to get written. Higgins and Delare and Beeman and the rest of them — passengers. You can feel it in your bones when you read their stuff. One-trippers or two-trippers.

"They aren't soaked in it. The big passage in Delare's *Planetfall*, the take-

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off from Mars: he's full of the wonder of it, sure. Who wouldn't be the first time? And he kept his eyes open, watching himself and the others. But I'm going to take off from Earth and Mars and Venus and Ganymede and the Moon twenty times before I dare to write about it. I'm going to get it *all* — brains, bone, muscle, and belly — takeoff, landings, free flight, danger, monotony — *all* of it."

"Sonnets? Prose poems?" asked Farwell, just to be saying something.

Angelo flushed a little, but his eyes didn't have the old pleading look. He didn't have to plead; he had what he wanted. "They were good exercise," he said stoutly. "I suppose I was trying to write form because I didn't have content. I think it's going to be novels — if I feel like it. And they can publish them or not publish them, just as they please." He meant it, Farwell thought. He had what he wanted.

"I'll look forward to them," he said, and shook hands with the boy. He didn't notice him leave. Angelo Messler, he thought; Pete Libonari. "— really creative synthesis of Pinero and Shaw —" pattered through his head, and the psychiatrist-thought followed naggingly after. He looked at his hands in amazement, suddenly realizing that they had been trembling all morning uncontrollably.

Coming . . . *in our next issue (on sale in mid-December) . . .*

THE BIG HOLIDAY, as poetically imaginative a picture of the future as even Fritz Leiber ever wrote;

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the first appearance in F&SF of the distinguished novelist Mabel Seeley —

stories by Idris Seabright, Chad Oliver, Bruce Elliott and others —

and for proper Dickensian Christmas enjoyment, a model ghost story by Russell Kirk.

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The wide-ranging mind of Gerald Heard has dealt most ably with such divergent subjects as a penguin civilization, speleological exploration and the post-Watson career of Sherlock Holmes. His two most recent books beautifully illustrate this controlled diffusion of talent. These are THE BLACK FOX *(Harper, 1951) and* GABRIEL AND THE CREATURES *(Harper, 1952). The first is a somber novel of demonism, a carefully erected edifice of terror and evil that meets any standard set by the late M. R. James. The latter is a joyous work of paleo-zoology, a picaresque history of the mammal told with reverence and humor. (If you have children, of almost any age, we strongly urge you to get the book and read it aloud to them. All of you will have a very happy time!) Now, Mr. Heard turns his attention to one of the very oldest problems of folklore and (as was to be expected from the author of* A TASTE FOR HONEY*) deduces the only — but long overlooked — solution to what was thought to be an insoluble problem.*

The Marble Ear

by GERALD HEARD

"YES, YES, just a curio. I bought the whole cabinet at one of those family sales; old lady last of family, no relatives, mostly junk. Good dealers didn't go. But I've made my best finds that way. Flair, pure flair. Still, I was just going to leave when I saw this — not this, though. You can see what this is! Pure Vernis Martin — bit battered of course, or of course I wouldn't have got it for — well what I did get it for. Though, mark me, it wasn't cheap. Oh yes, cheap if you will — and if you knew what I paid the auctioneer! But what I had to spend in getting it back to what you now see, that added to my bid will make little difference between what it's cost and what I'll have to ask you. What I had to recognise in that moment when it was 'put up', was, believe me, not this! No, it was no amount of crackling, and what time might be expected to do with Martin's lacquer-like finish, that kept this find for me. I had to see through — my nose had to 'flair' its way under a very adequate disguise; so adequate that most people would have sworn that the disguise, like a shirt of Nessus, must have eaten to the mischief the beautiful complexion it had so long swathed. Would you believe it, someone

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had touched it up, or rather made it up all over, until Robert Martin himself would never have known it. But I was right to trust him, once I suspected that his genius was lying shrouded underneath. Le bon Martin was *le grand maître*, the master of that family of masters. You see it is *le dernier mot* of their *fin de siècle* art, the finish of all finish. It's an actual surviving example of Robert's *poudre d'or* on the incomparable emerald ground. It's enduring as it's lovely, just because it's so finished. His famous varnish lacquer did stand up under the barbarians' brush and daub and endured with generous fortitude my anxious unguents as I summoned this Proserpine — you see that is actually the subject of the pictured central panel — back from the shades . . .

". . . You don't want the cabinet? Only that curio! That's worth nothing. Every shelf of this little piece was crowded with such scraps. They've been there so long, you can see they've left their prints on the old green velvet lining. That square there is the imprint of an old broken-springed musical box: the small round marks the form where lay a Great Exhibition 1850 memorial medal: those blunt bands and dents, a big nautilus shell. I threw the stuff away. Why didn't I throw this shell, too? Well, anyway, it's not a shell. I know it looks like that, lying that way up and in this light at the back of the shelf. I kept it, if you want to know, well partly because I made that mistake myself, and, acting on it, made, well I don't know if I'd call it a discovery. Perhaps I ought to say I raised a kind of question.

"Now you see — now that I've taken it out into a good light — it isn't a shell. For one thing it isn't shell at all, it's marble — a broken piece of marble. Though it has broken off so that, when put this way up, it does look like the top side of some sort of sucker-shell — a sort of albino abalone, you might say. But in another light I've once or twice thought it looked more like a squatting bleached toad. But now look at the other side. Yes, I thought that would surprise you. If you're a shell collector — conchologist, that's the word, isn't it? — off and on I have one of them dropping in on me — then this isn't for you, is it? Can't be much doubt what it is, can there? But, after all, it's quite in keeping with its habitat, as naturalists would say — just what one would expect. No doubt the old lady had had old ship-captain uncles. The type of men who when she was young, and antiquarianism itself was as youthful, callow, amateurish, were always picking up fragments like this, as mementoes from ruined fragmentary towns they touched at in their voyages.

"You see, it's a bit of a statue, never a doubt of it. It's broken off some old marble head. Perhaps the old business buccaneer himself battered it free and pocketed it. And afterward, when playing with his little niece, found it lying with tobacco and pieces of string, and gave it to her — cheaper than

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buying her sweets. You can see what happened: She was delighted — for her very own! A lovely, cool white ear, which you could keep in your pocket and when you put it into the drawer with your handkerchiefs, even then, if you put it flat down, people would only think it a shell. And, when you were by yourself, you could slip it out of your pocket and whisper into it all your secrets. And then you could change about and imagine that, after all, it wasn't an ear, it wasn't a piece of man-made carving. It was a wonderful white unknown shell from some uncharted sea. Then you could put it to *your* ear and it would whisper back to you, telling you, echoing with the rhythm of tides, waves and ripples from lagoons and golden beaches lovelier than any yet discovered. It had never been shaped and curved and hylxed by man with the chisel from a block of stone. It grew day by day, smoothly laid down in emerald light by a shadowy, opalescent creature who translated the pulse of the tides that swayed it, into this permanent design.

"You think I'm romancing about an old dame who was too stupid to know that she had in her room a Vernis Martin cabinet worth, well, what I'll get for it within three months. Well, in a way I am. But you see I did quite naturally what I feel sure she must have done — and I know you'd do, if I left you alone for a moment. Yes, I put it to my ear — ear to ear, you might say. No, please, not for a moment! Now that I've started, hear me out before trying to open that other line! 'Heard melodies are sweet, But those unheard are sweeter' — that's Keats, you know, '*Ode to a Grecian Urn*'. It shows, however, that he didn't know, was being poetic not scientific, not experimental. Maybe it might be true of urns with their quiet content of ashes, but anyhow this is from a statue — the statue of a god is my guess.

"Well, I did put it to my ear. Of course, if one could have had any doubt as to whether it was a shell, the ear backed up the eye with a bang. But that raised another odd little question. Not of course any longer one of conchology, but of acoustics. Of course what we hear in a shell is not the echo of old outer tides but the actual amplification of our own tide, the blood-stream beating up past our ears from heart to brain and back again. And I didn't hear that. What did I hear? I heard — well, I tell you frankly I have an appointment with a good aurist. It only took place two days ago or I'd have had his verdict by now. I'm going to know whether this queer piece of knapped-off carving has by chance acted as an unintended diagnostic instrument and suddenly told me of oncoming middle-ear trouble. What actually did I hear? Well, did you ever when a boy, for a silly lark, put the mouth piece of the old-style telephone to the ear piece and so build up what electricians rightly call a 'howl?' Well that's what this queer bit of chiselled stone did for me — or seemed to. Believe me, I dropped it as though I'd been stung. Certainly it was as painful as that, and even more alarming. I don't

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think I'd have been more shocked had the thing spoken to me! Or bitten me, for that matter. Didn't I do anything more? Well, I've told you — I rang up a big aurist's secretary — no good going to a little G.P. or even a small specialist — and he can't see me till tomorrow. Then I'll know. Ears are delicate things. I want mine. At auctions your ear has indeed to be as sharp as — indeed sharper than — your eyes, or you'll be landed without your bid or with one you didn't want.

"Do I know nothing more about the object? Well, I want to be frank with you. Good dealers are straight, you know, sharp and straight like a good knife's edge, my mother used to say. Yes, I think I do — but I'm not sure, you see. Come here a moment. You see, that's the impress left by this bit of carved stone on this the velvet shelf-lining. You see, it's left a little space where the pile still stands like grass in the centre of a fairy-ring in a field, tall and dense. Well, on that — as though the stone had been used as a paper-weight, or cover, I found this — this piece of writing. Maybe it was written by the old dame, or by the ship-captain or by somebody even earlier. The paper is old and torn. I feel sure it's from a Bible or a prayer book. Look at the edge there. ' . . . ver . . . men' appears just at the jagged top, most likely the ascription at the end of a prayer. The ink and penmanship is old too — the ink gone rusty, and, see, those long f-looking 's' in the word 'answer.' But it's clear enough to read today, whoever, and how ever long ago, wrote it. Read it. Yes, that's it. 'If it calls you, it will answer you, but be back by three'. That doesn't make any sense, you feel, and anyhow it must be fake. Back by three is modern time piece slang, you'd say. So did I, so did I. But now I'm not sure.

"Do you know what I do when I'm not sure? I wait — not just blankly. No, I put aside my puzzle, whether it's an engraving that may have been 'retouched' — an oil sketch glimmering through dirt and might be a Delacroix study but might lose its last suspicion of distinction at the first dab of cleaning — or any of those borderland finds from which we dealers get all the fun of gamblers. Yes, I put it aside and wait like an angler by his float and, sure enough, if I keep quietly expectant, a tug will come. Please, I'm not calling you a hooked fish. No, I don't want you to pay anything for it. I want you to collaborate. I'll let you have it for your promise to do one simple thing — keep it for a week and then come back. By then I'll have the verdict on my ears. I just want to get another line on this little question, that's all. There, I've wrapped it up for you. Please let me know — well, how it struck you."

Mr. Albu, dealer in objets d'art, etc., bowed his visitor to the door and then watched visitor and small parcel go down the street. When they had disappeared he did not leave the glass-panelled door but raised his hand into

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the daylight. It held the small torn fragment of yellowish paper but with the pen-writing against the palm, the plain side uppermost. Finally spectacles were brought to bear.

"There is something," he muttered, "Pencilled there — pencilled, perhaps, as long ago as the penning. Let's have another try at it. It still seems to make the same words. Can't make those strokes turn into anything else. First word's 'hear, second seems just as clearly 'apply' and that's followed by 'ora'. Why that's just moral stuff: 'What you hear you should apply'. And then something about prayer, no doubt. The thing then was a model ear to teach us symbolically how important it is to listen well. The western converse no doubt of those silly little monkeys that used to sell at the fourth rate Oriental stores with one that had his hands over his ears for fear he'd hear anything shocking. Well, I expect that is all that thing was. Indeed I'd be sure — if only I hadn't had that vertigo when I put it to *my* ear.

"But wait a moment, wait a moment! 'Pon my word, I don't believe there's ever been any 'H' before that 'ear'. What's more, that second 'p' in 'apply' — where's its tail? And look, the 'l' has been written twice and that 'y' — how round is its loop and what a shorn tip of a tail! Of course! Of course, it isn't 'Hear', 'Apply'. It's 'Ear Apollo.' And what about 'Ora?' Look, after the 'a' there's a straight down dash, I'd swear. That's it! Not a doubt of it. How stupid of me.

'Ear of Apollo, Oracle.' That's it. Surely, he was the god of the greatest oracle place in the world, Delphi, wasn't he? Why, maybe into that bit of crystalised calcium, carved to look like an ear, in a shrine dense with a pressure of superstitious suggestion we can't even suspect, the very air thick with those narcotic carbon dioxide fumes pouring up through the cracks in the temple floor, the Sybil herself reeling from the drugged atmosphere leaves her tripod, lays hold of the living image of the god, whispers her awful need of hidden knowledge and then presses her hot ear against that cold hard chiselled coil of stone, straining to catch a single word, straining to hear as she knew he the god could hear . . . Say, Solly, you didn't know you were a poet. Take it easy. You wait for the aurist before you run on like that. Maybe your trouble's gone nearer the brain than even the middle ear. Still, I'd take my oath on three things: I'm sure I've now got the sense of what's been scribbled here: I'm sure I did hear the devil of a shriek when I put that marble cup over my ear and I hadn't then deciphered this. And thirdly, I'll take a fair bet with myself my little customer will do the same and probably be bitten the same odd way I was.

'Well, maybe we've discovered or tumbled on a new aurist's-aid. Perhaps the great Wilkinshaw would remit part of my fee if I let him have the invention, it might add a number of new patients to his list!"

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The final speculation was unsustained. But the bet was won.

The customer, a dapper little man, though much given to curio collecting, had yet to be cured of his first enthusiasm. He still believed that he had the real flair and this time had really picked up that piece for which the biggest museums in the country would envy him.

"Here's an authentic fragment of a Praxyteles" awoke then no surprise in his friend Philip Vest, as, tearing off the paper and wadded wrapping, the prize-finder put the marble fragment on the tea table. He said nothing about his first having taken it for a shell. However, had he been so honest, that would not have improved the new find's reception.

"Optimistic Oliver as usual. I suppose it isn't 'An unique example of Phidias' just because the longer named sculptor sounds better?"

"Well, look at it!"

"Yes, it's a bit of carving no doubt. An ear, rather larger than life-size, broken from a statue, probably. The workmanship is completely realistic, the marble certainly weathered, except the fracture surface; that supports the supposition that it was broken away from a figure of out-scale proportions. It might just possibly be, at least from the workmanship, Hellenic — more likely Roman — quite possibly spoil from a modern cemetry won by a small sacrilegious boy from some appalling but defenceless angel who had been hatching a stout sarcophagised alderman hardly a century."

Oliver retrieved his treasure. His moods of optimism seldom stood critical fire. That was why he was always picking up new things, new floats to buoy his fancies in the place of those which had been pricked and sunken. He turned it in his hand.

Oh, very well, perhaps it would have been better to have imagained it was a shell. He raised it to his ear. His face fell even further. He muttered to himself, 'Old Solly, romancing as usual. Took me in this time, though, because he wasn't trying to sell anything. Unless this was simply ground bait to get me bid for the Vernis Martin cabinet. Though he ought to know I never could rise to that."

"Well," broke in Philip's voice, "defeated as the finder of an unknown and now only ear-extant Praxyteles, we are now shifting into the easier role of the medium listening to the secrets of the sea?"

"No! Do stop joking. Look here — isn't the sound which you hear in a shell put to your ear the same you'd hear in any curved object, for it's no more than the ordinary hum in one's ear being re-echoed and amplified."

"For once you are both careful and accurate. But why should you wish to debunk romance?"

"Well, put that to yours." Oliver held out the ear and his friend took it. "Put it to your ear and see. Or, to be accurate, listen."

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The other took it, hesitated for just a moment till urged by, "You're always for experiment, try! Perhaps *my* ears, too, have something wrong with them."

Philip raised the marble ear to his. The stone ear just covered the ear of flesh for a moment. Then it was torn away, flung to the carpet and the ear it had covered was being held with both hands.

"Oliver, you little beast of a fool!"

Then, still holding his hands to his ear, the speaker with the toe of his shoe turned over the piece of marble which had fallen and, till then, lay like a shell or now, in this light, perhaps more like a large bleached toad on the floor. The stone rolled over and the investigator peered into the hylix of the ear.

"You little brute. That's as nasty a practical joke as you could have played. And with all that silly build-up. I suppose it's one of those idiotic toys they now sell to arrested adolescents."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, drop your silly little act! That damned toy trap stung me in the ear. I don't care how the silly thing works, but it'd have served you right if I'd flung it in your face and broken your stage smile. Don't you know it hurts like the devil! I saw you trying it out on your ear. I suppose it's got a battery or some sort of shock-apparatus fixed inside it. You'd better pick it up. I'm not going to touch it with my hand. And take it out of the room!"

The second "What *do* you mean" had enough emphasis in it to shake the other's prejudice at least up to question point.

"You didn't buy this in a practical-joke toy shop?"

"I swear I didn't. I got it, of all places at old Solly Albu's, the place I'm always dropping into. He has nothing earlier than the middle of last century. Practical joke toys won't be antiques till the year 2000 and they'll never interest me!"

That certainly was true enough. "But then why did you ask me that question about acoustics?"

"Well, to tell the truth, Solly *did* mention to me that when, as I suppose most people would do, he put this cup to his ear he heard a kind of whoop."

"That's a mild word. But I suppose I ought to be glad to find you underrating anything, even the shock you've given me."

"Well, I think the word he used was *howl*."

"That's nearer but yet not near strong enough."

"Then you did hear something?" "Oh, don't be a bigger fool than you must! I don't think I can hear in that ear yet." And the owner caressed it tenderly as an endangered treasure.

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"But don't you see? Why I asked you that question and then told you to listen was because I'd just put the thing to my ear — and I'd heard nothing, absolutely nothing, not the hum one always does hear, not a shriek — just blank, dull dumbness as though my ear had gone dead deaf."

The two looked at each other. Curiosity began to mitigate estrangement and when Oliver picked up the stone, though with some hesitation, the other admired his courage and was ready to look over his shoulder as they both peered into the carved folds of the stone. The sculptor had cut deep and realistically but when they brought the piece under the lamp they could look right down to where the ear passage stopped. No, nothing either animal or mechanical was lurking or lodged there. It was Philip, not Oliver, who said, "What do you make of it?" and so encouraged, of course, the story, or at least most of it, was told.

The question "Why should Solly tell such a story?" was raised and refused to be laid. So the third review of the evidence, started by "Was that all he told you"? brought out that part which ten minutes before even Oliver would not have exposed to his friend's easy ridicule.

One thorn of experience is worth a whole wilderness of warning and evidently, too, one actual sting in the ear may open the mind to entertain theories which till then would never have been given a hearing. For again it was not Oliver who had to develop the theme. Indeed it was he now who hesitated. "But 'Back by 3' that's modern-phrased nonsense, surely?"

"But why must you think that people who didn't carry watches about always thought that three meant 3 o'clock?"

"But what else could it mean?"

"Well, start at the beginning; say it just means three and then ask three whats."

"You mean that it will answer you three times!"

Philip nodded and then said slowly, "That's the only sense it can have. And, by Jove, or whoever it is, if you'd heard that note it blew in my ear you'd hardly be standing there pulling your lip wondering whether it can call." Then with a certain tone of the customary superiority coming back into the voice, "You see, Oliver, old boy, again the text is quite clear if, I own, a bit odd. You see, it only works — mind, I'm simply interpreting a passage, not vouching for it — it only works for some people and you're one of those it doesn't work for and I'm one, in the distinguished company of Mr. Solly Albu, for whom it does. Maybe we are a very select company."

"Then you mean the old lady may have had it for years, and, from downy childhood to scraggy old age, put first her little shell-like ear and then her old piece of gristle against it and never heard a whisper or received a pinch?"

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"That seems common sense. I mean if one just takes the passage you have repeated on its face value. That's the only meaning it could bear."

"Then . . . ?"

They both looked at each other for some time. Oliver had placed the object face down, ear down on a small occasional table. Yes, in this light it did look like a rather impressionistically carved toad, squatting there looking up at you. The fracture following the grain of the stone made the hint of incurved legs and of a neckless head, with heavy lidded eyes rather unpleasantly suggestive. Again, it was Philip that pioneered, "You've said that I'm always willing to be accurately experimental. It's clear that we can settle this matter quite quickly. If I and Solly both have middle-ear trouble we may as well face the matter. But before I pay one of his high scale fees to Wilkinshaw to be told far most probably that it's either mere nerves or certain oncoming total deafness or a mastoid that must be out this week, I'm going to let that queer little pup of yours have one more bite, or shot, at telling me what it wants to say. Besides, you see, now that it has called, the initiative is up to me, according to your text. It ran, didn't it, 'It will answer you'!"

Oliver nodded but not smilingly. Sceptics, he reflected, when once pushed over, become the most rash of believers.

"You think I'm just the man with the closed mind," said Philip. "I'm not. Criticism means not debunking everything, but testing, judging everything. Very well, I have reason to suppose that here you have for once something worth testing and certainly the test can be done quickly and decisively. You will probably be surprised to know that I've often thought over such problems. You've never, as a matter of fact, asked my views on quite a number of topics. One is on the folk lore psychological problem — the basic story of which is the Three Wishes. The question I've often asked myself is, Is primitive man simply a timid fool or does he know that you cannot get your own way and that the only thing to do, if you ever get off the rails of strict law and causality, is to get back? To quote your laconic or gnomic authority or oracle, you may have three wishes but the last, the third, must find you where you were when you began. You must be back by three!"

"You mean, that, if it were true, you feel that you could be cleverer than the fossil fools and get there and back and yet bring back something with you?"

"Well, in none of the stories the men who got the chance were really up to their opportunity, were they?"

"You mean you are going to try?"

"Well, anyhow I don't have to put it to my ear. I presume all I have to

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do is to speak into it some properly defined, and guarded question or request and just see if anything happens."

"But what are you going to ask? The hundred pounds in old W. W. Jacobs's famous *Monkey's Paw* sounded quiet and modest and safe enough, but just look at the mess it managed to make of those harmless old innocents."

"But don't you see, it was nevertheless greed on which they were caught. They thought they were being cautious and modest, but really they were only being small and mean and timid, getting all they could, as they thought, safely, but still trying to trick the odd power and to be cleverer than it. They wanted to say in the end, Well, we did get something for nothing!"

"Well, that's pre-scientific and of course if this thing is, as it probably must be, just some power in ourself of pre-visionary psychokinesis (the interpolated "What in Heaven's name is that!" was swept aside) why then you see you would be provoking it by acting in that way, worse than if you asked for something big, for you would be proving you were frightened."

"Then you'll ask for a cool million or a hot one, depending on the source which you presume you are tapping?"

"I always thought your mind was bent on possessions. No, I want to understand, I want to be scientific about this. I have a really open mind and that has nothing to fear. I'm going into this for pure experiment."

"How can you really experiment with this sort of thing?"

"I shall ask simply and solely for a demonstration, for an explanatory manifestation."

"You're quite certain that you can do that without upsetting anything?"

"I've thought about that. I'm going to ask for evidence that will help us toward understanding the nature of the force or forces with which we are in contact."

"Always with the proviso that it's all a buildup from a blocked ear passage."

"Well, if you now like to play the sceptic, do. It *would* be like you, when some real evidence is found, to try and avoid it. Probably you're frightened when fantasy begins to show the first sign of turning into fact. Yet, as a matter of fact, it is *I* who heard the howl. Well, I intend to show you how an investigation of this sort should be handled."

Oliver was put aside. A rapid survey of the room was made. "That's it. As it happens one of your pieces of pose will do splendidly. That lily there."

The room ended in an alcove. The small apse had been hung all round its curve, from cornice to wainscot, with black velvet. The carpet was *tête-nègre*. At the centre of this half circle stood a small single-legged table of black lacquer. It was just big enough to support a vase of black Wedgwood. It

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was from this that there rose a single arum lily. There was a concealed light in the table that shot up a beam on the lily's under lip. "Arum lilies are examples of Nature acting as washerwoman. They deserve that disgusting word, immaculate; the starched white stock curved round that ridiculous yellow stamen, powdered with coarse pollen like an old Regency buck's nose. The arum lily is the flower of the *New Yorker's* title-page figure."

"Well, when you have finished showing off your superiority what do you mean to do about the poor vegetable?"

"Yes, I intend to experiment with your masterpiece of chaste flower decoration."

"You're not going to knock it about?"

"If the experiment works at all then nothing will happen — at least to *it*."

"Oh, don't be so clever. For Heaven's sake, if you really have an idea in your head, show it."

"Very well, very well, I'll show you that what I've said is literally true. Give me the ear."

A little gingerly Oliver picked up the toadlike object and handed it over to Philip. The other took it, remarking, "Now come up beside me — good experiments should always have two observers. You see there is nothing in the simple mise-en-scène you have so tastefully composed, to distract our attention. We can watch completely undisturbed by anything but the experimental object. I have decided to ask quite a simple question and to make the easiest and yet I think quite a convincing request. I feel sure that it can and will involve nothing else. You see, that's the importance in all experimentation, to make it self-contained. Besides it will avoid the trouble which is said to have followed every earlier attempt at this kind of exploration. And now, please give all your attention, as I shall, just to the lily and nothing else. Promise to keep your eyes on it and never take them off for a minute, not for a second."

"All right," Oliver promised.

"Now!" The ear was raised so as to be near the speaker's mouth, but both pairs of eyes were fixed on the lily."

"Now! This is my wish: without spilling a drop of the water in the vase, or shedding a grain of the pollen from the flower, please turn the vase and the flower upside down and hold it there while we observe."

Philip's observation had however to stand a strain, for he couldn't help feeling that the stone in his hand gave a single throb or beat, just as his voice stopped speaking. He had to struggle hard not to look down at it. But he succeeded and, by the silence at his side he felt sure that Oliver was also keeping the test piece steadily and exclusively in view.

Perhaps two seconds passed and then his power of keeping his attention

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fixed had a second test. He felt a sudden wave of dizziness that made him want to close his eyes for a moment. Again he successfully resisted. Nothing had happened. The lily, right out to its curled lip, had not stirred, had not vibrated. Philip gazed till his eyes ached.

It was then almost a relief when Oliver said, "I haven't taken my eyes off the flower but I suppose speaking doesn't matter. Have you seen anything? I haven't."

"No, I suppose making an observational statement doesn't matter and even if you made a request I don't think you would be attended to."

"Do you think you have?"

"I don't know."

"How long are you going to wait?"

"Well I never heard how long the process is said to take in expressing itself."

"We can't stay like this all the evening."

"Wait, while we count twenty slowly."

They counted under their breaths, staring at the lily which certainly seemed quite undisturbed.

"Have you finished your score?"

"Yes, yes, but I'm not sure what one does now. It would be a pity to spoil all through a silly bit of impatience."

But it was Oliver who now was masterful. "It's you who are silly. You'd better go to an aurist. I'll tell Solly when he's seen his. Meanwhile I'm going back to my book."

Before Philip could turn he heard however a small gasp. Then he turned round and so hadn't to ask its cause. The room was there, right enough. Everything was in place right down to the smallest detail, and yet everything was fundamentally wrong. He glanced at Oliver. True, the same alarm, that he felt he must be registering, was clearly enough on Oliver's.

"What's wrong?" Philip asked waveringly, and then after a checkup all round him again, "There's nothing wrong really, is there?"

The answer was not reassuring. "I can't see what it is, but don't you feel it? That's what is wrong, that's it, the very devil! If only one could see what was wrong it would be better. It's, it's . . . that's it, it's like standing on one's head!"

"What do you mean?" Philip asked. But already he knew, only feared so much that he hoped the other would be able to deny.

"You fool, don't you see you have had your wish? Naturally you could be granted our silly request — not a drop of water split, not a grain of pollen shed. Of course, the answer is quite simple. Just turn things, turn everything upside down."

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They stood silent for a while. Then the lump of marble was put down. No, that made no difference to the beastly sensation. On the whole it seemed to get worse. It was a sort of comprehensive, 189° vertigo. There was the carpet visibly at their feet. But all their sensation told them that the floor was in fact the ceiling. If you turned and looked at the damned lily, there it stood, but you felt and knew that it was in point of fact hanging down like some horrible orchid from the roof of a haunted cavern.

It was no use lying down, as in ordinary vertigo. The thing was too complete, too thorough, to be cured in any such way.

For a moment they crouched down on the floor. Then Oliver remarked, "What's the use of that? We've just got to get used to it. No doubt it's simply a trick in our minds,"

"Or a trick played on our minds."

"Have it as you like, but all we have to do is to disregard it."

That was easier said than done. They spent the rest of the evening trying to disregard it, but the effect only grew more distinct. At dinner it was hard not to feel that the soup should not be slopping down from the plate, up at which one seemed to feel one was looking and, unless the feeling was fought all the time, that all the table things should not be descending like a blizzard to rest in quiet confusion heaped up on the ceiling. That they did nothing of the sort did not relieve the painful conviction, the horrid sense that at any moment they must lose their hold and crash.

The two sat in silence for sometime after. Even smoking seemed unnatural. The only moment of relief was when the coils of smoke went up and floated along or rested idly on the ceiling before dissipating.

"Oliver," the silence had been long, "Oliver, I'm sorry I was superior about all this. The fact was that I thought, of course, that nothing could happen and that, if there was anything in any way in it, we should simply discover some small psychological or even, perhaps, physical puzzle. But this makes the old folktales true. Perhaps there is no chance of accident. Perhaps something that is unlimited in its power to upset what we call the world of common sense is always listening to us and does once in a million answer us."

"Well, you don't have to go back to folklore for that. The religious have always said that is so."

"Oh, but that's religion."

"Yes, but they've also always said — at least as long as religion was really believed in and practised — that, if you didn't go the right way to speak to the power, you could go the wrong and, though usually it would disregard you, every now and then it would reply. Then it would have been better, far better, that you had never called it!"

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"Oh, don't go on like that. If you're right, don't you see how wrong you're making out the whole of the thing to be and the fix we've gotten ourselves into!" Then after a pause, "I didn't mean to be sore. But I'd better be frank, for I expect it's obvious and you're feeling the same way. I'm frightened, quite horribly frightened and just because there *is* so little, in fact nothing actually, to point to. I only wish my ears *were* wrong. Then I could go and have it out with a doctor. But if I —— if we —— go to a doctor now, why he'd only want to send us to a mental home." He got up from his chair unsteadily. "Yes" he said, "one can walk about but it's damned unpleasant to have to do it against the whole grain of one's feelings! How diabolically cunning to have caught me in this way when I thought I was quite safe. I wish now I had asked for a thousand pounds — at least I would have had my fee before having to pay for it. Here I have had nothing and lost everything."

All the time he walked cautiously up and down the carpet, taking his steps deliberately and putting his feet as though he had to attach them like suckers to the carpet.

"You look like a man already far advanced in locomotor ataxia," remarked Oliver but with no superiority or mockery in his voice. The remark was all too true and the feeling was one that Oliver knew he must himself experience the moment he left his chair for the floor. And as he watched his companion another dismal, but to Oliver all too explicable symptom appeared. Gradually Philip's arms drew up. Now they were level with the shoulders, finally, with a sigh the pacing figure let them rise up above his head. There seemed no stretch or strain in them. Rather, they now seemed to relax; they were streaming upward, like seaweed trails its arms and fronds toward the light.

"I know it's idiotic, but you can't imagine the relief it gives," said Philip.

"Oh, yes I can! I've been feeling the need to do that increasingly the last half hour." And Oliver seated in his chair let his arms also rise up and, as it seemed to him, hang down to the real centre of gravity.

Finally, the walker settled down with a sigh by the sitter. But they still let — as it seemed to them — their arms float up into the air, or rather hang at ease. At last Oliver volunteered, "We'd better go to bed. After all, there's a good chance that the beastly sensation — for you see it is nothing but that — will wear off in the night. Such things often clear up after sleep."

There was no answer to this, neither assent nor dissent. But after a long pause suddenly a reply was given by action. To "What are you going to do?" given in a tone of rising anxiety the only answer was all too clear. The fractured marble had been snatched up.

Oliver was beside Philip in a moment. "Don't! Do you yet need con-

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vincing that you can't fool — well whatever is behind that dead ear? Don't you know you'll only land us in something worse!"

"No I don't. In fact I know quite the reverse!"

"Will nothing convince you?"

"There you're quite wrong. I'm going to act as you will see, just because at last I *am* convinced! Till now I really haven't believed. I've been in two minds — my mind was open and wavering. Now it's made up. I know that we are in touch with a Force quite indefinite — infinite if you like — I shan't quarrel with terms now!"

But then it's madness to go on.

"On the contrary, here we have real guidance!"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you see, the folktales give us the clue. The saying you brought back with this — this relic — said the very words."

"But it said get back by 3 — and surely it means, if folk history means anything, that you have very little chance of doing that — your one hope being that you may have acquired something and with that something you buy back your old place of petty safety! But we have nothing to give back — we haven't taken anything — we've simply made a break-through into some horrid other dimension or sense of being."

"Very well, we can obey, learn our lesson, and go back to the old safe, limited, friendly world of up and down."

"You mean you are just simply going to wish that the vase were the right way up again?"

"It seems the sensible and natural thing to do."

There was a pause. Then Oliver's voice said, "Of course we could, the folktales say, have one more wish and yet get back safely to base."

"There," said Philip, "I knew you would spoil everything if you were let. Don't you know that we should just be run into a further corner, a tighter bottleneck? Isn't it bad enough to feel turned inside out like this? No, I'm master here," he paused, "or at least medium and I am going back home, back to base *now*."

He seized up the stone, held it in front of his mouth saying slowly. "I wish that the flower, and all that that entails, were once more in right relationship, on the level, right way up."

Again he felt the stone throb in his hand but this time twice. Again he felt the vertigo, but so strongly that this time he had to close his eyes. But when he opened them he felt not unsteady but, with a wonderful refreshment, absolutely firm.

"Lord how wonderful it is," he said, "to find you can walk freely. I never appreciated before how lovely the sheer sense of balance is."

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He turned round to Oliver in the chair. Oliver's arms had floated down onto the chair's arms and he sighed. It was a mixed sigh; certainly it held quite a lot of relief, but also, rising through the relief, was clearly audible regret. And after a moment the regret was expressed in complaint. "I really don't see why you shouldn't have waited until we had made one more experiment. It was practically guaranteed and, after all, you said you wanted to experiment and what we've been just through, though it was interesting and not in the least dangerous, was simply a sort of introduction, I'm sure. We were pretty certain to get something quite wonderful on the second shot."

"What a fool you are. Really, will nothing cure your mind of the wish for excitement and sensation? We prove that there is power here. That somehow through that piece of haunted stone a small tunnel has been made out of this safe world into the space where there are tempests of force and where we are told not to trespass. Yet you insist on poking your nose out among the live cables of the power house of the universe!"

"Well, it's you who are being rhetorical and fanciful now; I only want to experiment. We have found out nothing yet, only found that there might be something to find. And then at that point you go clean over into cowardly superstition, and say, 'now *please* don't do anything for fear you might possibly offend somebody.' "

"Well, I'm resolved that it shall not be used again and, as you can't make it work and I can, that settles the matter!"

"It's mine and it has still another wish left in it! Perhaps you and Solly are two of the rare people who can use it. Well, Solly won't, so I'll keep it by me and when you've got over your shock, you mark my words, you'll be ready to try again."

The taunt didn't, as it should have done, provoke a reaction. On the contrary it led to a silence and, after that, what was said, was said very quietly, even reflectively. "Perhaps after all you are right."

"Then let's put it away for tonight and when we are fresh tomorrow think up some really safe way of using the last wish."

"You don't see any difficulty in the matter that we have already had our two and so, if we use that last one, we shan't have one with which to get back to base? You're not content with having been given a real piece of evidence of how good it is to be in a sane world — however insanely we behave in it, how good it is only to be presented with problems within our power to handle and forces which really serve us faithfully, both as aids and educators?"

"I don't know what's come over you, with all this preaching. Did you really have a bad shock?"

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"I think I had exactly the same experience as you had. I think we both went right near to the limit of things and saw that the screen is much thinner than anyone but the wise think it is and that outside the screen is force of such intensity that if you don't know the rules there, better the worse of this than the normal of that."

"Well, you may be right. I can see in a way you are. But still, I don't see why we shouldn't experiment. It's because, in a way, I'm sure we have found *something*, that I feel we really ought to go on."

"Look here," Philip's voice was still quiet, indeed it had grown quieter, "I know that what has now happened to you may happen to me. I see how quickly the effect wears off. Indeed, I can feel it already wearing off of me. By tomorrow I'll be the me I was and, I own, in my pompous, defensive, cautious way I can be a bigger fool, because more certain that I'm clever, than you can be. I shall forget more thoroughly than you. Yes, your wish for fancy somehow keeps your mind from closing as fast as mine, with all its boast of common sense. Though when mine has been pried open it's such a shock it stays open longer and wider than yours. You can believe and not believe at the same time. I can only do one or the other. A little while ago, I didn't. Now I do. Tomorrow maybe I'll be shut fast again. So" and he swung out of the chair, "my mind's made up."

Oliver sprang up too. "You shan't! You shan't!" He tried to get hold of the stone. The other, taller and stronger, held it over their heads.

"Remember," Philip cried, "this is the last and I wish for both of us! 'I wish that we have no more wishes'!"

It might have been Oliver's continuing struggles to get the stone, but then it might have been the stone itself. If it did throb three times then the third beat was so violent that it hopped from his hand held high above his head. It flew in an arc and smashed down on the marble hearth stone. There was a sharp crack and fine fragments and slivers scattered themselves in all directions. The blow of the fall onto the stone slab had pulverised it, there was no ear left, only sharp edged pebbles and dust.

For a moment the competitors broke apart and turned to where the debris lay. Oliver swayed a little and then sat down. After a moment Philip followed suit. They sat looking at the dark pile of the carpet littered with the white chips and coarse dust. Oliver turned his eyes to his companion. "It's gone and I suppose we ought to clean it up?"

"But you feel inclined to leave it as it is, which you find strange because of what used to be your strongest characteristic, the wish to tidy things up?"

"Yes, you've guessed right, but how do you know?"

"Because, of course, I feel the same kind of feeling?"

"What do you mean — no one ever accused you of being over-tidy!"

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"No, I mean I feel the same kind of change working its way in me, in my will."

Oliver's face, which had become for him unusually thoughtful, now showed signs of actual disquiet. "You don't mean that we have been granted your non-wish?"

"Wait and see."

They waited, sitting in silence. Yes, it was clear some sort of ebb had set in, first a quiet and easy indifference, a willingness to delay doing anything. Then that gave way, or like a mist rolled back and showed an even further depth. An immense calm seemed to be invading the mind; why hurry, why fret, why not live now? And while that question rose it expanded into a still wider, more hopeful doubt. Why should the future and the past be always overlaying the present? Why not look fully, and for the moment it was presented, at the present?

The same thought must have reached the same stage at the same time in both minds. For the two heads were raised. They were looking at every object in the room, as though each had been a new and remarkable acquisition in an art museum. It was Oliver who spoke first, but his tone had already so changed that it would have been hard to recognise the rather excited accent in which he had formerly spoken.

"I'd never noticed before the way the firelight makes that pattern of moving color on that mahogany chair-back." He did not say it to make Philip attend or draw attention to himself. It was a spontaneous expression of pleasure and he remained looking at the gleaming reflection for a number of minutes. Indeed he only stopped doing so when Philip remarked, "I've been enjoying the design made on the dark brown of the carpet by the scattered white fragments. It's beautiful, like an abstract mosaic, the way the large pieces and the dust make a rhythm formation."

Sometimes one drew the other's attention to what he was looking at, but such remarks were infrequent. For the most part each spent his time gazing slowly at some object and then, after a good while, moving his eyes to the next thing that presented itself. Finally, very slowly, Oliver looked down at his watch. He gazed at it for a considerable time, once or twice shifting his wrist to see it better and in different light. Then, finally, he said, "Well, I'll be going to bed. If I wasn't so content I'd be sorry to leave what I've been enjoying."

Philip rose too. "If I wasn't so interested I'd be anxious, for fear that tomorrow the effect, this power of interest, might have begun to wear off."

Oliver smiled, "But as a matter of fact you know the content won't wear off and I know the anxiety won't return." He yawned, "Merciful heavens, I never knew that one was living in such a tenterhook condition, always

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hurrying on to get to the next moment and yet always dimly aware that one was throwing away the last without having known how to extract its sense from it."

"Yes," Philip replied, "and at the same time always fearing, with every reason for the fear, that the next moment would certainly be no more pleasant, no more comprehensible and quite possibly much worse."

"What a life!" they said together, smiling.

However when Oliver reached the door he turned back. "I suppose we did get the wish to be wishless?"

"Do you doubt it?"

"No, but it seems too good to be true. Can you really have managed to get round the fate that always spoiled the wishes?"

"No, I think by our getting to the end of our tether one wish earlier than the others are said to have done, we were able, however blindly, to wish the only wish which is really creative. The one that undoes the knot, the knot which isn't in the world outside us — that is the mistake — but in us."

"I can feel that what you say is true, though I'm not at all sure that I can understand it. But I don't mean to spoil the discovery by that kind of foolishness."

"Yes, I believe it will stay, provided we don't try to unpick it by exploiting it, even by trying to explain it to anyone, not even to ourselves."

"All right, I'm certainly more than content. I'll just tell Solly that it burst when we tried to get a sensible wish out of it and leave him to make what he can of that. I expect old Wilkinshaw will have told him to leave off putting things to his ear and so he'll be quite content with the ending of the story."

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In the 80s there was a family lived on the Kansas border named Bender. These Benders, thrifty folk, made of their home a sort of inn, or overnight stopping-place for prairie travelers. Usually such wayfarers stopped with the Benders permanently for the unlovely clan slaughtered their guests whenever they were able and buried the remains in their orchard or down cellar. In a way, the Bender manse was the sort of place where a man "does not eat, but is eaten." No one knows for sure what became of the four Benders; they were last seen fleeing westward a few hours before a horrified citizenry dug up the orchard and discovered what was planted there. In this bit of pure horror Anthony Boucher argues that the fugitive ogres found safety in the California desert, live there now, still following the ogre's traditional way of life. — J. F. McC.

They Bite

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

THERE WAS no path, only the almost vertical ascent. Crumbled rock for a few yards, with the roots of sage finding their scanty life in the dry soil. Then jagged outcroppings of crude crags, sometimes with accidental footholds, sometimes with overhanging and untrustworthy branches of greasewood, sometimes with no aid to climbing but the leverage of your muscles and the ingenuity of your balance.

The sage was as drably green as the rock was drably brown. The only color was the occasional rosy spikes of a barrel cactus.

Hugh Tallant swung himself up on to the last pinnacle. It had a deliberate, shaped look about it — a petrified fortress of Lilliputians, a Gibraltar of pygmies. Tallant perched on its battlements and unslung his field glasses.

The desert valley spread below him. The tiny cluster of buildings that was Oasis, the exiguous cluster of palms that gave name to the town and shelter to his own tent and to the shack he was building, the dead-ended highway leading straightforwardly to nothing, the oiled roads diagramming the vacant blocks of an optimistic subdivision.

Tallant saw none of these. His glasses were fixed beyond the oasis and the town of Oasis on the dry lake. The gliders were clear and vivid to him, and

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the uniformed men busy with them were as sharply and minutely visible as a nest of ants under glass. The training school was more than usually active. One glider in particular, strange to Tallant, seemed the focus of attention. Men would come and examine it and glance back at the older models in comparison.

Only the corner of Tallant's left eye was not preoccupied with the new glider. In that corner something moved, something little and thin and brown as the earth. Too large for a rabbit, much too small for a man. It darted across that corner of vision, and Tallant found gliders oddly hard to concentrate on.

He set down the bifocals and deliberately looked about him. His pinnacle surveyed the narrow, flat area of the crest. Nothing stirred. Nothing stood out against the sage and rock but one barrel of rosy spikes. He took up the glasses again and resumed his observations. When he was done, he methodically entered the results in the little black notebook.

His hand was still white. The desert is cold and often sunless in winter. But it was a firm hand, and as well trained as his eyes, fully capable of recording faithfully the designs and dimensions which they had registered so accurately.

Once his hand slipped, and he had to erase and redraw, leaving a smudge that displeased him. The lean, brown thing had slipped across the edge of his vision again. Going toward the east edge, he would swear, where that set of rocks jutted like the spines on the back of a stegosaur.

Only when his notes were completed did he yield to curiosity, and even then with cynical self-reproach. He was physically tired, for him an unusual state, from this daily climbing and from clearing the ground for his shack-to-be. The eye muscles play odd nervous tricks. There could be nothing behind the stegosaur's armor.

There was nothing. Nothing alive and moving. Only the torn and half-plucked carcass of a bird, which looked as though it had been gnawed by some small animal.

It was halfway down the hill — hill in Western terminology, though anywhere east of the Rockies it would have been considered a sizable mountain — that Tallant again had a glimpse of a moving figure.

But this was no trick of a nervous eye. It was not little nor thin nor brown. It was tall and broad and wore a loud red-and-black lumberjack. It bellowed "Tallant!" in a cheerful and lusty voice.

Tallant drew near the man and said "Hello." He paused and added, "Your advantage, I think."

The man grinned broadly. "Don't know me? Well, I daresay ten years

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is a long time, and the California desert ain't exactly the Chinese rice fields. How's stuff? Still loaded down with Secrets for Sale?"

Tallant tried desperately not to react to that shot, but he stiffened a little. "Sorry. The prospector getup had me fooled. Good to see you again, Morgan."

The man's eyes had narrowed. "Just having my little joke," he smiled. "Of course you wouldn't have no serious reason for mountain-climbing around a glider school, now would you? And you'd kind of need field glasses to keep an eye on the pretty birdies."

"I'm out here for my health." Tallant's voice sounded unnatural even to himself.

"Sure, sure. You were always in it for your health. And come to think of it, my own health ain't been none too good lately. I've got me a little cabin way to hell-and-gone around here, and I do me a little prospecting now and then. And somehow it just strikes me, Tallant, like maybe I hit a pretty good lode today."

"Nonsense, old man. You can see —"

"I'd sure hate to tell any of them Army men out at the field some of the stories I know about China and the kind of men I used to know out there. Wouldn't cotton to them stories a bit, the Army wouldn't. But if I was to have a drink too many and get talkative-like —"

"Tell you what," Tallant suggested brusquely. "It's getting near sunset now, and my tent's chilly for evening visits. But drop around in the morning and we'll talk over old times. Is rum still your tipple?"

"Sure is. Kind of expensive now, you understand —"

"I'll lay some in. You can find the place easily — over by the oasis. And we . . . we might be able to talk about your prospecting, too."

Tallant's thin lips were set firm as he walked away.

The bartender opened a bottle of beer and plunged it on the damp-circled counter. "That'll be twenty cents," he said, then added as an afterthought, "Want a glass? Sometimes tourists do."

Tallant looked at the others sitting at the counter — the red-eyed and unshaven old man, the flight sergeant unhappily drinking a coke — it was after Army hours for beer — the young man with the long, dirty trench coat and the pipe and the new-looking brown beard — and saw no glasses. "I guess I won't be a tourist," he decided.

This was the first time Tallant had had a chance to visit the Desert Sport Spot. It was as well to be seen around in a community. Otherwise people begin to wonder and say, "Who is that man out by the oasis? Why don't you ever see him any place?"

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The Sport Spot was quiet that night. The four of them at the counter, two Army boys shooting pool, and a half dozen of the local men gathered about a round poker table, soberly and wordlessly cleaning a construction worker whose mind seemed more on his beer than on his cards.

"You just passing through?" the bartender asked sociably.

Tallant shook his head. "I'm moving in. When the Army turned me down for my lungs I decided I better do something about it. Heard so much about your climate here I thought I might as well try it."

"Sure thing," the bartender nodded. "You take up until they started this glider school, just about every other guy you meet in the desert is here for his health. Me, I had sinus, and look at me now. It's the air."

Tallant breathed the atmosphere of smoke and beer suds, but did not smile. "I'm looking forward to miracles."

"You'll get 'em. Whereabouts you staying?"

"Over that way a bit. The agent called it 'the old Carker place.' "

Tallant felt the curious listening silence and frowned. The bartender had started to speak and then thought better of it. The young man with the beard looked at him oddly. The old man fixed him with red and watery eyes that had a faded glint of pity in them. For a moment Tallant felt a chill that had nothing to do with the night air of the desert.

The old man drank his beer in quick gulps, and frowned as though trying to formulate a sentence. At last he wiped beer from his bristly lips and said, "You wasn't aiming to stay in the adobe, was you?"

"No. It's pretty much gone to pieces. Easier to rig me up a little shack than try to make the adobe livable. Meanwhile, I've got a tent."

"That's all right, then, mebbe. But mind you don't go poking around that there adobe."

"I don't think I'm apt to. But why not? Want another beer?"

The old man shook his head reluctantly and slid from his stool to the ground. "No thanks. I don't rightly know as I—"

"Yes?"

"Nothing. Thanks all the same." He turned and shuffled to the door.

Tallant smiled. "But why should I stay clear of the adobe?" he called after him.

The old man mumbled.

"What?"

"They bite," said the old man, and went out shivering into the night.

The bartender was back at his post. "I'm glad he didn't take that beer you offered him," he said. "Along about this time in the evening I have to stop serving him. For once he had the sense to quit."

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Tallant pushed his own empty bottle forward. "I hope I didn't frighten him away?"

"Frighten? Well, mister, I think maybe that's just what you did do. He didn't want beer that sort of came, like you might say, from the old Carker place. Some of the old-timers here, they're funny that way."

Tallant grinned. "Is it haunted?"

"Not what you'd call haunted, no. No ghosts there that I ever heard of." He wiped the counter with a cloth, and seemed to wipe the subject away with it.

The flight sergeant pushed his coke bottle away, hunted in his pocket for nickles, and went over to the pin-ball machine. The young man with the beard slid onto his vacant stool. "Hope old Jake didn't worry you," he said.

Tallant laughed. "I suppose every town has its deserted homestead with a grisly tradition. But this sounds a little different. No ghosts, and they bite. Do you know anything about it?"

"A little," the young man said seriously. "A little. Just enough to —"

Tallant was curious. "Have one on me and tell me about it."

The flight sergeant swore bitterly at the machine.

Beer gurgled through the beard. "You see," the young man began, "the desert's so big you can't be alone in it. Ever notice that? It's all empty and there's nothing in sight, but there's always something moving over there where you can't quite see it. It's something very dry and thin and brown, only when you look around it isn't there. Ever see it?"

"Optical fatigue —" Tallant began.

"Sure. I know. Every man to his own legend. There isn't a tribe of Indians hasn't got some way of accounting for it. You've heard of the Watchers? And the Twentieth-Century white man comes along, and it's optical fatigue. Only in the Nineteenth Century things weren't quite the same, and there were the Carkers."

"You've got a special localized legend?"

"Call it that. You glimpse things out of the corner of your mind, same like you glimpse lean, dry things out of the corner of your eye. You incase 'em in solid circumstance and they're not so bad. That is known as the Growth of Legend. The Folk Mind in Action. You take the Carkers and the things you don't quite see and you put 'em together. And they bite."

Tallent wondered how long that beard had been absorbing beer. "And what were the Carkers?" he prompted politely.

"Ever hear of Sawney Bean? Scotland — reign of James I or maybe the VI, though I think Roughead's wrong on that for once. Or let's be more modern — ever hear of the Benders? Kansas in the 1870s? No? Ever hear of Procustes? Or Polyphemus? Or Fee-fi-fo-fum?

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"There are ogres, you know. They're no legend. They're fact, they are. The inn where nine guests left for every ten that arrived, the mountain cabin that sheltered travelers from the snow, sheltered them all winter till the melting spring uncovered their bones, the lonely stretches of road that so many passengers traveled halfway — you'll find 'em everywhere. All over Europe and pretty much in this country too before communications became what they are. Profitable business. And it wasn't just the profit. The Benders made money, sure; but that wasn't why they killed all their victims as carefully as a kosher butcher. Sawney Bean got so he didn't give a damn about the profit; he just needed to lay in more meat for the winter.

"And think of the chances you'd have at an oasis."

"So these Carkers of yours were, as you call them, ogres?"

"Carkers, ogres — maybe they were Benders. The Benders were never seen alive, you know, after the townspeople found those curiously butchered bodies. There's a rumor they got this far West. And the time checks pretty well. There wasn't any town here in the 80s. Just a couple of Indian families last of a dying tribe living on at the oasis. They vanished after the Carkers moved in. That's not so surprising. The white race is a sort of super-ogre, anyway. Nobody worried about them. But they used to worry about why so many travelers never got across this stretch of desert. The travelers used to stop over at the Carkers, you see, and somehow they often never got any farther. Their wagons'd be found maybe fifteen miles beyond in the desert. Sometimes they found the bones, too, parched and white. Gnawed-looking, they said sometimes."

"And nobody ever did anything about these Carkers?"

"Oh, sure. We didn't have King James VI — only I still think it was I — to ride up on a great white horse for a gesture, but twice there were Army detachments came here and wiped them all out."

"Twice? One wiping-out would do for most families." Tallant smiled.

"Uh-huh. That was no slip. They wiped out the Carkers twice because you see once didn't do any good. They wiped 'em out and still travelers vanished and still there were white gnawed bones. So they wiped 'em out again. After that they gave up, and people detoured the oasis. It made a longer, harder trip, but after all—"

Tallant laughed. "You mean these Carkers of yours were immortal?"

"I don't know about immortal. They somehow just didn't die very easy. Maybe, if they were the Benders — and I sort of like to think they were — they learned a little more about what they were doing out here on the desert. Maybe they put together what the Indians knew and what they knew, and it worked. Maybe Whatever they made their sacrifices to, understood them better out here than in Kansas."

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"And what's become of them — aside from seeing them out of the corner of the eye?"

"There's 40 years between the last of the Carker history and this new settlement at the oasis. And people won't talk much about what they learned here in the first year or so. Only that they stay away from that old Carker adobe. They tell some stories — The priest says he was sitting in the confessional one hot Saturday afternoon and thought he heard a penitent come in. He waited a long time and finally lifted the gauze to see was anybody there. Something was there, and it bit. He's got three fingers on his right hand now, which looks funny as hell when he gives a benediction."

Tallant pushed their two bottles toward the bartender. "That yarn, my young friend, has earned another beer. How about it, bartender? Is he always cheerful like this, or is this just something he's improvised for my benefit?"

The bartender set out the fresh bottles with great solemnity. "Me, I wouldn't've told you all that myself, but then he's a stranger, too, and maybe don't feel the same way we do here. For him it's just a story."

"It's more comfortable that way," said the young man with the beard, and took a firm hold on his beer bottle.

"But as long as you've heard that much," said the bartender, "you might as well — It was last winter, when we had that cold spell. You heard funny stories that winter. Wolves coming into prospector's cabins just to warm up. Well, business wasn't so good. We don't have a license for hard liquor and the boys don't drink much beer when it's that cold. But they used to come in anyway because we've got that big oil burner.

"So one night there's a bunch of 'em in here — old Jake was here, that you was talking to, and his dog Jigger — and I think I hear somebody else come in. The door creaks a little. But I don't see nobody and the poker game's going and we're talking just like we're talking now, and all of a sudden I hear a kind of a noise like *crack!* over there in that corner behind the juke box near the burner.

"I go over to see what goes and it gets away before I can see it very good. But it was little and thin and it didn't have no clothes on. It must've been damned cold that winter."

"And what was the cracking noise?" Tallant asked dutifully.

"That? That was a bone. It must've strangled Jigger without any noise. He was a little dog. It ate most of the flesh, and if it hadn't cracked the bone for the marrow it could've finished. You can still see the spots over there. That blood never did come out."

There had been silence all through the story. Now suddenly all hell broke

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loose. The flight sergeant let out a splendid yell and began pointing excitedly at the pin-ball machine and yelling for his payoff. The construction worker dramatically deserted the poker game, knocking his chair over in the process, and announced lugubriously that these guys here had their own rules, see?

Any atmosphere of Carker-inspired horror was dissipated. Tallant whistled as he walked over to put a nickel in the juke box. He glanced casually at the floor. Yes, there was a stain, for what that was worth.

He smiled cheerfully and felt rather grateful to the Carkers. They were going to solve his blackmail problem very neatly.

Tallant dreamed of power that night. It was a common dream with him. He was a ruler of the new American Corporate State that should follow the war; and he said to this man "Come!" and he came, and to that man "Go!" and he went, and to his servants "Do this!" and they did it.

Then the young man with the beard was standing before him, and the dirty trench coat was like the robes of an ancient prophet. And the young man said, "You see yourself riding high, don't you? Riding the crest of the wave — the Wave of the Future, you call it. But there's a deep, dark undertow that you don't see, and that's a part of the Past. And the Present and even your Future. There is evil in mankind that is blacker even than your evil, and infinitely more ancient."

And there was something in the shadows behind the young man, something little and lean and brown.

Tallant's dream did not disturb him the following morning. Nor did the thought of the approaching interview with Morgan. He fried his bacon and eggs and devoured them cheerfully. The wind had died down for a change, and the sun was warm enough so that he could strip to the waist while he cleared land for his shack. His machete glinted brilliantly as it swung through the air and struck at the roots of the sagebrush.

Morgan's full face was red and sweating when he arrived.

"It's cool over there in the shade of the adobe," Tallant suggested. "We'll be more comfortable."

And in the comfortable shade of the adobe he swung the machete once and clove Morgan's full red sweating face in two.

It was so simple. It took less effort than uprooting a clump of sage. And it was so safe. Morgan lived in a cabin way to hell-and-gone and was often away on prospecting trips. No one would notice his absence for months, if then. No one had any reason to connect him with Tallant. And no one in Oasis would hunt for him in the Carker-haunted adobe.

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The body was heavy, and the blood dripped warm on Tallant's bare skin. With relief he dumped what had been Morgan on the floor of the adobe. There were no boards, no flooring. Just the earth. Hard, but not too hard to dig a grave in. And no one was likely to come poking around in this taboo territory to notice the grave. Let a year or so go by, and the grave and the bones it contained would simply be attributed to the Carkers.

The corner of Tallant's eye bothered him again. Deliberately he looked about the interior of the adobe.

The little furniture was crude and heavy, with no attempt to smooth down the strokes of the ax. It was held together with wooden pegs or half-rotted thongs. There were age-old cinders in the fireplace, and the dusty shards of a cooking jar among them.

And there was a deeply hollowed stone, covered with stains that might have been rust, if stone rusted. Behind it was a tiny figure, clumsily fashioned of clay and sticks. It was something like a man and something like a lizard, and something like the things that flit across the corner of the eye.

Curious now, Tallant peered about further. He penetrated to the corner that the one unglassed window lighted but dimly. And there he let out a little choking gasp. For a moment he was rigid with horror. Then he smiled and all but laughed aloud.

This explained everything. Some curious individual had seen this, and from his account burgeoned the whole legend. The Carkers had indeed learned something from the Indians, but that secret was the art of embalming.

It was a perfect mummy. Either the Indian art had shrunk bodies, or this was that of a ten-year-old boy. There was no flesh. Only skin and bone and taut dry stretches of tendon between. The eyelids were closed; the sockets looked hollow under them. The nose was sunken and almost lost. The scant lips were tightly curled back from the long and very white teeth, which stood forth all the more brilliantly against the deep-brown skin.

It was a curious little trove, this mummy. Tallant was already calculating the chances for raising a decent sum of money from an interested anthropologist — murder can produce such delightfully profitable chance by-products — when he noticed the infinitesimal rise and fall of the chest.

The Carker was not dead. It was sleeping.

Tallant did not dare stop to think beyond the instant. This was no time to pause to consider if such things were possible in a well-ordered world. It was no time to reflect on the disposal of the body of Morgan. It was a time to snatch up your machete and get out of there.

But in the doorway he halted. There coming across the desert, heading for the adobe, clearly seen this time, was another — a female.

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He made an involuntary gesture of indecision. The blade of the machete clanged ringingly against the adobe wall. He heard the dry shuffling of a roused sleeper behind him.

He turned fully now, the machete raised. Dispose of this nearer one first, then face the female. There was no room even for terror in this thoughts, only for action.

The lean brown shape darted at him avidly. He moved lightly away and stood poised for its second charge. It shot forward again. He took one step back, machete-arm raised, and fell headlong over the corpse of Morgan. Before he could rise, the thin thing was upon him. Its sharp teeth had met through the palm of his left hand.

The machete moved swiftly. The thin dry body fell headless to the floor. There was no blood.

The grip of the teeth did not relax. Pain coursed up Tallant's left arm — a sharper, more bitter pain than you would expect from the bite. Almost as though venom —

He dropped the machete, and his strong white hand plucked and twisted at the dry brown lips. The teeth stayed clenched, unrelaxing. He sat bracing his back against the wall and gripped the head between his knees. He pulled. His flesh ripped, and blood formed dusty clots on the dirt floor. But the bite was firm.

His world had become reduced now to that hand and that head. Nothing outside mattered. He must free himself. He raised his aching arm to his face, and with his own teeth he tore at that unrelenting grip. The dry flesh crumbled away in desert dust, but the teeth were locked fast. He tore his lip against their white keenness, and tasted in his mouth the sweetness of blood and something else.

He staggered to his feet again. He knew what he must do. Later he could use cautery, a tourniquet, see a doctor with a story about a Gila monster — their heads grip, too, don't they? — but he knew what he must do now.

He raised the machete and struck again.

His white hand lay on the brown floor, gripped by the white teeth in the brown face. He propped himself against the adobe wall, momentarily unable to move. His open wrist hung over the deeply hollowed stone. His blood and his strength and his life poured out before the little figure of sticks and clay.

The female stood in the doorway now, the sun bright on her thin brownness. She did not move. He knew that she was waiting for the hollow stone to fill.

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As popular a filler item as we've ever published was Ron Goulart's outrageous parody, Letters to the Editor *(F&SF, April 1952). That originally appeared in the* Pelican, *the humorous monthly of the University of California, when Mr. Goulart was a freshman. Now, as a first-semester sophomore, he is editor of the* Pelican, *no less — the first time in the history of his (and our) Alma Mater that so lowly an undergraduate has held such a post. This is only the first, we are convinced, of a number of literary records to be shattered by Goulart; there is, in fact, something record-breaking in his first published short story which we here present to you. Logical in its absurdity, tightly objective in its technique, it is completely individual. With most young science fiction writers one thinks, "Good illustration of the Van Vogt influence," or "Fine specimen of the Bradbury school"; but this is purely and unmistakably of the School of Goulart.*

Conroy's Public

by RON GOULART

CONROY GLANCED at his watch. Whistled three notes of a tune. The phone rang. He picked it up.

"Hello," he smiled into the mouthpiece.

"Hello. It's me."

"Hi, me. How are you?"

"Fine. And say, Ted, I read your new book. It's really great."

"Glad you liked it, Ted. The critics seemed to enjoy it, too."

"It was good."

"Thanks. Well, goodbye."

"Goodbye."

Conroy glanced at his watch again. Someone knocked at the door.

"Come in, Ted," he called.

The door opened. A man entered who looked exactly like Conroy, and was wearing the same blue sport coat and gray slacks.

"Hi, Ted," grinned the man.

"Hello. Sit down." Conroy nodded toward a plump leather chair.

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"We've decided to bring out a dollar edition of your first four novels. That sound okay?"

"Sounds great. Well, I'll see you."

"Certainly."

Conroy leaned back in the soft chair. Lit a cigarette. He picked a copy of The *Saturday Review of Conroy* off the table at his side.

"Damned good article on me," he muttered after a few minutes.

He rose and walked to the draped windows of his office. He pulled back the drapes and gazed out at the tropical maze in front of him. He stepped back to his desk. Pushed a buzzer.

A man who looked and dressed exactly like Conroy entered.

"Conroy," said Conroy, "take a letter. To Mr. Ted Conroy, *Saturday Review of Conroy*, New Conroy. Dear Mr. Conroy. I wish to thank you for the pleasant article your magazine printed about me. Yours truly, Ted Conroy. Got it?"

"Yes, sir." The man started to leave.

"Oh," called Conroy, "are the boys here? It's almost time for the picnic."

"They should arrive any minute, sir."

Conroy slit the sparkling white envelope. Took out the letter and the check.

The letter said: "Dear Mr. Conroy: *Startling Conroy Stories* was very impressed by your story, 'The Invisible Conroy.' Enclosed is our check for 1000 conroys. Sincerely, Ted Conroy."

"One of my best yarns," Conroy murmured. A horn honked outside. Conroy put on a red hat with a green feather. He picked up a basket in the kitchen and hurried out the back door.

"Hi, fellows," he beamed.

"Hi," beamed the six men in the station wagon. They all looked very similar. They tipped their green, red-feathered hats to Conroy.

Conroy hopped into the back seat. "Let's go."

"What'll we do now?" Conroy asked, finishing a sandwich.

"How about some baseball?" said one.

"Haven't got enough. Need nine men on each team," Conroy pointed out.

"Oh, we do not."

Conroy snapped his fingers. Eleven men in blue sport coats and gray slacks stepped out of the woods nearby, carrying baseball equipment. Bats, mitts, and bases. One of them tossed a baseball above his head.

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Conroy's team won the ball game. The score was 97 to 3.

"That's the way it goes, Ted," Conroy said, patting his rival captain on the back.

"Oh, that's okay, Ted," grinned the loser.

"Well, we'd better be heading for home," Conroy said, picking up the picnic basket. "How many did I bring out?"

"Seven including you."

"I think it was six including me."

"Seven."

"Six. Dammit. Six!" Conroy clapped his hands. Twelve of his likenesses vanished.

"It *was* seven," one insisted.

"He's nuts, Ted," another said, nudging the persistent one.

"Sure. I know it was six." Conroy jumped into the driver's seat. The others entered the station wagon.

The motor started. The machine roared off toward home.

Conroy stopped the car by a tree-filled field. "Hey, Teddy," he shouted.

A man closely resembling him hurried over to the vehicle. He wore overalls over a blue sport coat and gray slacks. "What, Mr. Conroy?"

"Read my latest book?"

"Which one was that?"

"*This Side of Conroy*. Haven't you read it?"

"Last one I read was *A Farewell to Conroy*."

Conroy frowned. "Well, you'd better read it. Yes, you had better. How's the apple crop?"

"Fine. Fine."

"Well, that's good."

"Yeah."

"What's the matter?"

"I'm damned tired of this blasted orchard!"

Conroy glared at the man. The man gulped. Then he vanished.

"Try to talk back, eh?" Conroy laughed. Then he grew thoughtful. He turned to his creations. "What are you? Dammit, what are you?"

"Thought images of the almighty Conroy." They smiled at him.

"Okay, dammit!" He started the car. "Got too many things on my mind."

The clock in Conroy's study struck eight. Conroy glanced at the door. Coughed.

Four minutes passed. The door opened.

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"You're late," said Conroy.

"Sorry," said the other.

"We begin playing checkers at eight. Eight sharp. Get it?"

"Certainly. I'm sorry."

Conroy was finishing his orange juice when Conroy, the butler, came into the breakfast nook. He handed Conroy a copy of the *Daily Conroy*. "Uh . . . there's someone to see you, sir."

"What? I'm not expecting anyone."

"I know, sir. But she said . . ."

"She?"

"Yes, sir. A young lady. Shall I show her in?"

"Yeah. Go ahead. . . ." Conroy sat staring at the door. He didn't even bother to read the review of his latest book which was on the front page.

The butler returned escorting a girl. A blonde girl. A very attractive blonde girl. Even with a large scratch over her left eye.

"Excuse me, Mr. . . ."

"Conroy. Ted Conroy."

"Well, Mr. Conroy, my ship crashed on your place this morning. I was wondering if you could put me up until I can repair it."

"How in blazes did you crash on this planet? This is a privately owned planet. I'm the only guy on it."

The girl looked at him oddly. "Well, you see I'm Dianne Kent. Maybe you've heard of my dad. He owns the planet next to yours."

"Oh, my neighbor."

"Uh huh. So, well, there was a little party over on Kane Milton's planet and coming home I sort of got off course. I usually don't drink that much . . ."

Conroy smiled faintly. "That's okay. I'll have my butler show you to a room. I'll send up a first-aid kit so you can take care of that scratch. Send up some breakfast, too. Conroy!"

The butler came into the room.

The girl looked from Conroy to the butler. "I thought *your* name was Conroy."

"It is."

The horses trotted slowly along the jungle path.

"Nice of you to take me riding, Mr. Conroy, but I have to look at my ship. I'd better radio Dad, too."

Conroy smiled. "We can ride down that way. Get a look at my place as we go."

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The girl was quiet for a moment. "Tell me, Mr. Conroy. Why does everyone here look just like you?"

"Why not?"

The horses went on trotting.

The girl looked at the jungle. "I've been on a few private planets. Some odd ones, too, Mr. Conroy. But you'll admit this one *is* rather . . . unusually populated."

"It suits me, Miss Kent."

The girl looked at Conroy and said nothing. He looked at the jungle, then suddenly spoke out.

"Two years ago I was engaged to a girl on Venus. I was well off financially. But I had a great desire to be a writer. And there was nothing else I knew how to do. Well, I sent stuff in and sent stuff in, but I couldn't sell a thing. Couldn't give my stories away. I even had one of my novels, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Conroy*, printed up with my own money. But nobody would buy it. And only a few of my friends took copies."

"Was it any good?"

"What?" Conroy lit a cigarette. Then thought of offering one to Dianne.

"The book."

She took the cigarette and he leaned over and lit it for her. "Of course it was good. Not as good as my later stuff. But good."

"I see."

"Well, the girl got fed up with me and ran off with a guy who wrote Martian stories for a pulp magazine. So I was a little broken up by things. I went off into the back country. And I came across an old Venusian medicine-man. He taught me to make these thought images of myself. I had to sort of persuade him. He warned me that the trick was dangerous." Conroy blew smoke at the jungle to his left. "I got a pretty good idea. I bought this planet. Set up a city, buildings, everything. And I set up publishers. All of them run by my thought images. I had a pretty easy time selling my stuff then. I don't regret the move."

"That's nice."

"To blazes with the publishers on Venus, Mars, and Earth. And to blazes with girls, too."

"Thanks."

"Oh, I don't mean you," Conroy explained. He looked at her. "No, I don't."

"Swell. Who reads your stuff, by the way?"

"More thought images. I get twenty or 30 fan letters a day."

"Good for you. But don't you ever get lonesome?"

"Nope. I've got a baseball team, football team, basketball." He laughed.

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"Even got an acting company. Act my own plays, of course."

"Of course. Don't you miss girls?"

Conroy was silent for a long time. Then he murmured, "I don't know."

Conroy sat on a pile of leaves, watching the girl work on her ship. Wishing he knew how to help.

After a while she came over and sat down next to him. "Well, I think we've got her fixed." She smiled. "Dad didn't seem worried. Of course, he never is."

Conroy offered her a cigarette. "Say, why not stay here a few days. I mean, you haven't seen all the place yet."

"I don't know." She bent toward his lighter. "Though if I go back now I'll be in time for Aunt Barbara's party. Maybe I should stay a day or two."

"That's swell."

"Say, how do all your stories and books get printed?"

"Well, I bought all kinds of presses and such. Then read up on printing. Those thought images do a pretty good job now. Should have seen my first novel, *Remembrance of Conroy's Past.* I never studied rockets much. Sorry."

"Oh, I didn't mean that."

They sat watching the evening fill the sky.

"Is it really dangerous," Dianne asked, "creating the images?"

"No. No danger at all."

"Suppose one of them knocks you over the head? And takes your place?"

"When I go, they go."

"Are you sure?"

Conroy paused. "Well, why not?"

She frowned. "I don't like this, Ted. Why did the medicine-man say it was dangerous?"

"Oh, he was crazy." He reached over and took her hand. "Don't worry, Dianne. As long as I have complete control nothing's going to happen."

Conroy wrote only one short story in the next three days. But he rationalized that even a writer has to live now and then. He was dressing for late supper with Dianne when someone knocked on the door of his bed room.

"C'min."

"Hi, Ted."

"We're not playing checkers tonight, Ted."

"Oh. I see. The girl, huh?"

"Yes. The girl. Miss Kent."

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The other nodded. Started toward the door. "Say, Ted . . ."

"What? You liked my story in the *Conroy Monthly*?"

"Oh, sure. But, well . . . I have a question."

"Shoot. Where'd I get the idea? Well, when I was . . ."

"Why aren't there more women on this planet?"

"What? What!" Conroy stared at him.

"I said, we ought to have more women on this planet. That's all."

"I think you'd better leave."

"But me and the other fellows have been talking it over and . . . well, you have this gal and . . ."

"You and the other fellows? Look, Teddy, there aren't any other fellows. You and the other fellows are just examples of a little trick I picked up."

"Yes, I know, but . . ."

"Dammit!" Conroy pointed at the other. "Pfft." Nothing happened. Conroy picked up the desk clock and threw it at his image. The other stood there smiling. Conroy grunted. Beads of perspiration appeared on his pale forehead. Then, slowly, the image faded. Conroy sank into his chair. "God! How in the Hell? I must be run down. Wrote 10,000 words every day last week. Two novels a month takes something out of you."

He sat quietly. Thinking. He walked to his bed and pulled the bell cord. Heard steps on the stairs. The door swung open. Conroy, his valet, stood there. "You rang, sir?"

Conroy eyed him. Then without a word he snapped his fingers. The valet disappeared.

"That's better," Conroy smiled. He went downstairs.

Conroy and Dianne were sitting in the garden. Light from the moons trickled through the surrounding trees.

"Guess I have to be going soon, Ted."

"Yeah." He stood up. "Say, would you like to dance? I know a little music. I could think up a band."

"Please, no, Ted. I don't like those images."

Conroy laughed. "Still worrying." He sat down again. "They can only do what's in me. You ought to hear my music. Real Conroy-land."

"Only what's in you . . ." Dianne frowned. "And supposing you . . . change?"

"Supposing I am changing? I am, you know. Ever since you . . ."

"Ever since I landed? But there's only one of me. That's another reason to worry."

Conroy looked serious. "Dianne, you know . . . well, I thought I was through with women. I convinced myself that writing was all I wanted.

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And being read and liked. For the past couple of years that's what's kept me going. Now I've found something I want more than my writing, more than my public . . . well, I mean . . . as a character in one of my books once said, 'I'd be extremely pleased if you would consent to be my wife.' "

Dianne giggled. "Well, Ted . . . as a character in one of your stories might say, 'I'd be charmed, sir, to become your spouse.' Okay?"

He kissed her.

Conroy opened the long white envelope. Removed a letter and a check and tossed them on his desk.

He slipped two of his stories into a manila envelope and addressed it to *Weird Conroy Tales*. Then he leaned back and smiled.

There was a slight knock on the door. Then Dianne came in. "Hi, Ted."

Conroy got up and crossed to her. "Hi. Still leaving tomorrow?"

"I've got to, Ted. Dad's got some big parties and stuff planned."

"I guess so."

"Well, why don't you come with me?"

"I've got to settle everything here. And I've got ideas for two or three novels I want to finish up. I may not write much after this, you know."

"Then you want us to pick you up here a month from now?"

"Uh huh."

Conroy didn't do any writing for the rest of the day.

"Be careful, Ted."

"You're the one to be careful. I'd hate to have you crash onto some other guy's planet." He kissed her goodbye.

Dianne walked slowly to her ship. "I don't like them, Ted."

"Why not? They look just like me. Don't worry. I'm in control. Bye."

"Bye."

Conroy stood watching the ship climb upward against the bright sky. After several minutes he walked back to the house.

Conroy, the mailman, was just nearing the house as Conroy started up the steps. He turned and waited.

"Just this today," grinned the mailman. He handed Conroy a manila envelope.

"Thanks." He took the envelope into his office and casually slit it open. *Weird Conroy Tales* was apparently using a new type envelope.

He didn't quite realize what was in the package at first. It took him some time to understand the small slip of paper attached to the contents.

It was a rejection slip.

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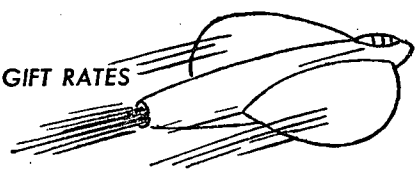

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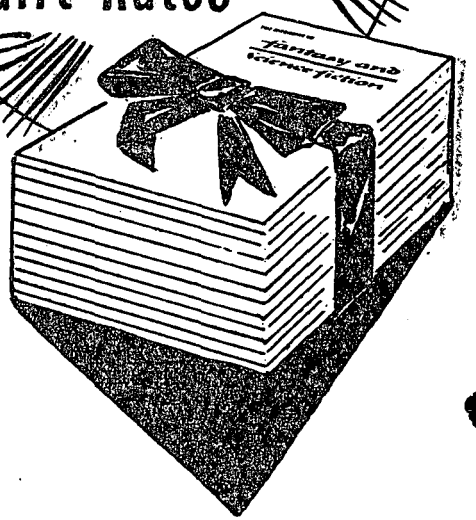

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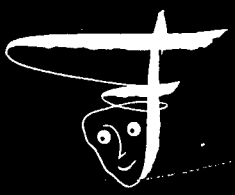

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